

CANVAS Meeting Minutes, 4-29-22

Participants in Attendance:

- Brett Ranon Nachman (CAN | NC State University)
- Brittany Jackson (CAN | Hiram College)
- Beth Felsen (Spectrum Transition Coaching)
- Bethany Bradley (RIT)
- Brittany van Beilen (University of Toronto)
- Bruce Robertson
- Courtney Butler (Rutgers)
- Dave Caudel (Frist Center for Autism and Innovation, Vanderbilt University)
- David Top
- Denise Davidson (Loyola University Chicago)
- Gary McManus (RIT)
- Hannah Melton (Marian University)
- Jill Fahy (Eastern Illinois University)
- Jill Underhill (Marshall University)
- June Shin (Seattle Central College)
- Ken Gobbo (Landmark College)
- Kimberly Johnson
- Lee Williams (CAN)
- Lisa Pennisi (University of Nebraska-Lincoln)
- Madison Overbey (University of Colorado-Denver)
- Matthew S. Joffe (LaGuardia Community College | CUNY)
- Nina Schiarizzi-Tobin (University of Rhode Island/Disability, Access, and Inclusion/START URI Program)
- Rachel Schuck (UC Santa Barbara)
- Samahra Zatman (University of Toronto)
- Sarah Goodfield Weinstein
- Tom Beeson (Clemson University)

CANVAS Updates

- Join our CANVAS list-serv - Our primary means of connecting, sharing info
 - Click [here to join](#)
 - Send email to the list
<https://groups.google.com/a/collegeautismnetwork.org/forum/#!forum/can-canvas/join> by emailing can-canvas@collegeautismnetwork.org
- [CAN Membership Details](#) We appreciate the support your membership provides to help us offer CANVAS and other opportunities.
- [Summit Collections](#)
- [Summit Call for Proposals](#)
- **Share a Resource!** Are you conducting any research studies that you'd like the community to know about? Read an interesting article recently? Discovered a cool resource? This is your chance to briefly share that news

with the CANVAS group! List your name and any relevant links below so others may access it at their convenience!

- Recruiting Autistic Adults for an Online Survey examining Sticky Thinking (Repetitive Thinking), Stimming (Repetitive Behaviors) and Mental Health.
 - This isn't specific to adults in higher education, but definitely applies to them.
 - To learn more, [please check out our study flyer here](#) or email Elliot Gavin Keenan at egkeenan@ucla.edu or Ava Gurba at ava.gurba@stonybrook.edu
- Ken Gobbo mentioned the [Summer Institute for Educators at Landmark College](#), including in-person and on campus offerings

Research Presentation

- **Dr. Brittany L. Jackson** (Online Learning Manager, Hiram College)
- **Presentation Title:** Postsecondary Social Support Programs for Students with ASD as Described by Students, Directors, and Staff
- **Description:** In this presentation, Dr. Jackson will present her recent study, which surveyed students, directors, and staff at 2-year and 4-year postsecondary institutions known to have a social support program (SSP) for students with ASD. The study sought to learn how students, directors, and staff described why students decided to attend their institution and the SSP. It also examined the advantages, disadvantages, challenges, and areas of improvement that those surveyed felt described their SSP. Dr. Jackson will discuss the survey responses and the insight the responses provided about SSPs from this study, which will be relevant for institutions that currently have SSPs and institutions that are considering implementing SSPs on their campus.

Presentation Notes

- Brittany began by outlining definitions for accommodations, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), neurotypical, and Social Support Programs (SSPs). SSPs center on social and emotional well-being, as well as academics.
- In sharing a statement of the problem, Brittany mentioned the emergence of SSPs, absence of research, and commonality of ASD students withdrawing from higher ed at a 40% higher rate than their counterparts.
- The study's purpose was to understand how participants "describe the rationale for students with ASD choosing SSPs," why participants, directors and staff believe students choose their program, and how they view the advantages/disadvantages of student programmatic participation.
- Brittany's literature review entailed exploring various dimensions of ASD and social support programs (SSPs).
- This study operated from a constructivist framework, with the study recognizing the subjectivities across individuals and also shared values.
- This qualitative study applied a descriptive or hermeneutical phenomenological approach. The purposive sample enlisted individuals connected to SSPs (3

students, 13 directors/staff), engaging in online surveys, plus phone calls with directors/staff. Brittany also engaged in detailed notetaking and journaling.

- Analysis consisted of examination of biases, coding textual evidence from surveys, grouping into themes, looking at quotations, engaging in external review, and other techniques.
- Survey questions asked how they learned about and why they chose the SSP.
- Students expressed how they felt SSP staff provided social and emotional support and benefitted from not feeling like a “lone wolf,” in the words of one.
- Disadvantages of SSP participation related to engaging in difficult social interactions and finding it hard to engage with one another based on how characteristics presented themselves. Time management was a frustration for some. Challenges involved seeking more instruction on self-reflection for peers and wanting more appropriate social interactions.
- Among the areas of improvement students noted as viable included the desire to work in more open spaces and receive better communication from staff.
- For marketing their programs, staff relied on websites, conferences, and brochures. They recognized that a number of factors contributed to students being attracted to their programs, including reputation, location, affordability, and student autonomy.
- Staff viewed SSP advantages as entailing career opportunities for students, boasting good retention and graduation rates, and providing additional supports such as networking and social engagement. Similarly, strengths were the types of services offered, campus partnerships forged, personalized staff interactions with students, and student choice/autonomy.
- Disadvantages entailed stigmas, time commitment, and programmatic cost.
- Areas of improvement staff noted: more funding, staffing, opportunities for socialization, and post-graduation employment opportunities.
- Programs themselves struggle with generating inclusion and acceptance in their own spaces.
- SSP staff should think more intentionally about recruitment practices, including honoring the “right fit” for students. Recognizing students’ needs and meeting them where they are is critical.
- That staff demonstrate empathy and provide a safe space, or safety net, for students is encouraging and works to bolster what SSPs accomplish.
- Staff and students focused on the challenges and opportunities associated with building specific communities; students described them more negatively at times.
- Students focused on communication, physical space, and active listening as opportunities for improvement.
- Implications for university administration entail hiring practices (e.g., empathetic staff), promoting self-reflection, and exploring the possibilities of starting a SSP.
- Limitations included a low student response rate, self-selection among participants, and the lack of institutions that just have certificate programs. An international approach may be effective.

- Ultimately, there is room for growth and improvement around communication, self-reflection, physical spaces, human and financial capital, and internship and career placement.
- Finding the right fit is key in how students may choose programs.
- Advantages relate to the belongingness and community that SSPs cultivate, in concert with featuring empathetic staff, but all must contend with continued stigmatization in participation in SSPs and how social interactions unfold.
- Areas of improvement for this study included having more detailed survey questions, obtaining IRB from individual institutions, expanding to international colleges, just focusing on undergraduate institutions, and heightening student involvement.
- Suggestions for additional studies would be examining how SSP services differ from traditional accommodations, identifying how students grow socially via SSP participation, and following students' success beyond college.

Questions:

- Lee: "What role should autism program staff play, if any, in educating the rest of campus about autism?"
 - Brittany feels they have a responsibility in promoting autism awareness, and she is actually beginning a neurodiversity effort on her campus that will focus on bolstering familiarity and acceptance.
- Brett: How do SSPs navigate building spaces where students may feel disconnected based on the salience of their autism-related characteristics?
 - Brittany said it's so important for all spaces to build community. Additionally, having knowledge about one's diagnosis can be useful.
- Lee: "Does your research tell us anything that programs need to change more immediately to better serve students?"
 - Students commented on the communication piece. The more transparent the messaging it, the lower the likelihood they will be misinterpreted.
- Jill Underhill: "What do you think about how level of supports offered and cost associated with the program factors into perceptions of both students and staff about these programs? I find at our University, a lot of perceptions about our SSP is related to the cost and selectivity of the program."
 - It is frustrating that some programs charge exorbitant fees for student participation. There must be better ways to not put the burden on the families. Perhaps grants could help offset costs.
- Gary: "Dr. Jackson, you suggested further study is necessary in terms of developing metrics for measuring social growth. Based on your work and experience so far, how would you start?"
 - While not sure how to start that, she feels enlisting ideas from the CANVAS community would be useful. Bringing multiple groups would be additive, including autistic perspectives.
- Denise: "Thank you for your presentation! Now that you've completed the project, what would you do differently to promote student recruitment & involvement in your project if you had to do it again? Any ideas? It seems that students had some very interesting thoughts."

- If targeting to work with specific institutions again, finding out what they may require (e.g., IRB approval), would be helpful in sharing out the study. If holding it on her own campus, offering food is helpful. Providing incentives, in any case, that honor participants' time is essential.

Upcoming CANVAS Meetings:

Fri, May 20 at 1pm ET

- **Kayden Stockwell** (PhD Student, Department of Psychology, University of Virginia)
- **Presentation Title:** Understanding the Experiences of Autistic Undergraduates at the University of Virginia
- **Description:** Using a mixed-methods approach, we are interested in understanding what it's like to be an autistic undergraduate at UVA. The experiences students share with us will be used to provide feedback to the university on where support has been working and recommendations on how it could be improved.

CANVAS meetings to resume in July