

CANVAS Meeting Minutes, 2024-11-08

Participants in Attendance

- Alexandra Samuel
- Andrea Haas (Social Signal, Vancouver)
- Annette Kendall (University of Missouri-Columbia)
- Audrey Scaer
- Brett Ranon Nachman (College Autism Network | University of Pittsburgh)
- Brittany van Beilen (University of Toronto)
- Carly McMorris (University of Calgary)
- Dana Kanhai
- Daniel Lebrija (San Francisco State University)
- Emily Coombs (University of Alberta)
- Elinor Lim (University of Portsmouth)
- Florencia Ardon (Cornell University)
- Gabriella Velazquez
- George Wolford (Appalachian State University)
- Gina Hoagland (University of Maryland Baltimore County)
- Jennifer Chiavacci (Savannah College of Art and Design)
- Jennifer Williamson (University of Calgary)
- Jane McLeod (Indiana University)
- Jonathan Vincent (Lancaster University)
- Ken Gobbo (Landmark College)
- Mark Tapia
- Marlee Bickford-Bushey (Landmark College)
- Megan Ames (University of Victoria)
- Mikaela Elliott
- Ramanjot Kaur (Highline College)
- Sabrina Paglia (University of Toronto)
- Susan Hedges (Appalachian State University)

Meeting Plan

CANVAS Updates

- Join our CANVAS list-serv - Our primary means of connecting, sharing info
 1. Click [here to join](#)
 2. Send email to the list
<https://groups.google.com/a/collegeautismnetwork.org/forum/#!forum/can-canvas/join> by emailing can-canvas@collegeautismnetwork.org
 3. [CAN Membership Details](#) We appreciate the support your membership provides to help us offer CANVAS and other opportunities.
- **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!

- Audrey: “A team I’m on recently published a study focused on the experiences of autistic counselors in counselor education programs
<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/aut.2024.0210>”
- Emily: “I am working on a paper titled “Navigating Disclosure: the reported motivations, experiences, and consequences of Autistic students’ disclosure in Canadian Higher Education” Hoping to submit to a journal later this month”
- Mark: “I am writing a book chapter on neurodiversity affirming practices and collaboration on college campuses.”
- Alexandra: “It occurs to me that folks here might be interested in a pilot program we’re running — <https://auteen.ca> This started as a personal project but since we have previously done online community development work in the disability world, we turned it into a pilot project to see if we could scale it up a little bit.”
- Megan: “In case anyone is looking for autism-specific supports in Canada; a list of the institutions with descriptions/links to their supports can be found here:
<https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/ames/autistic-student-resources/>

Presentation Details

Presenters: Emily Coombs (PhD Student, University of Alberta), Dr. Megan E. Ames (Assistant Professor, University of Victoria), Dr. Carly McMorris (Associate Professor, University of Calgary), and Dr. Jonathan Vincent (Lecturer, Lancaster University)

Presentation Title: Autism in Higher Education: Canadian Findings and Key Themes

Presentation Notes

- In this presentation, the team shared several studies they have conducted.
- First, Dr. Ames discussed a paper under review with *Autism in Adulthood*, essentially a review of literature reviews.
- They followed a PRISMA systematic review format. Initially they curated around 2300 articles, and they ultimately yielded 26 studies within their review.
- Half of studies were published within the last five years with most conducted by American researchers.
- The team coded based on the themes of the review, strengths, gaps, and main takeaways. Across these papers six themes were identified as needs: methodological rigor, evidence-based, individual supports, consideration of heterogenous populations with diverse academic experiences, non-academic factoring impeding academic experiences, showing relevant gaps, and guided by lived experience and frameworks.
- Emily produced a word cloud of the review. Most of the research was focused on supports, transitions, and challenges and needs, among other topics. Barriers, families, and online also surfaced, albeit less so.
- The second study, as Emily discussed, centered on mapping services in Canada. Canada features 258 publicly-funded postsecondary education institutions in Canada, including 91 universities, 90 technical and vocational, and 77 junior colleges.
- They wanted to know the types of autism-specific college supports on Canadian websites.

- Research questions aimed to uncover autism-specific supports available to students, ascertain differences in distributions of these supports across institution types, and figure out if there are particular distributions across Canada.
- Only 15/258 had autism-specific supports meeting their inclusion criteria. 9/15 only had one support.
- Among the supports identified included general information on autism, transitions to university, social groups, and peer mentoring.
- There was greater representation among institutions in Ontario.
- Junior colleges were overrepresented.
- The third paper presented by Dr. Vincent focused on accessible learning staff and administrators' perceptions within a Canadian context.
- 61 institutions were included in the recruitment process; 139 staff members were recruited; 36 staff and administrators participated in semi-structured interviews.
- They wanted to know what types of autism-specific supports are available to these stakeholders, estimate how many autistic students attend university, and what barriers and facilitators exist.
- Staff articulated a range of supports across different levels, largely based on how much experience institutions had.
- Whereas some institutions reported having a few dozen autistic students, others estimated in the hundreds.
- Most staff saw themselves as gatekeepers to allowing students to access accommodations.
- Current supports included subthemes like transition support, personnel, gatekeeping, and social support.
- Ideal supports noted entailed wrap-around services, social and practical supports, connected and consistent supports, and those that were autistic-led.
- Staff articulated the lack of time and funding, along with siloed spaces and overstretched staff, as among the reasons why there were not as many supports, even if they wanted these supports.
- The fourth study delivered by Dr. McMorris focused on autistic students' desires for academic and non-academic needs. This study was conducted by autistic students in Calgary, involving both surveys (19 participants) and interviews (6 participants).
- Survey participants noted accomplishments such as high grades, receiving scholarships, and persistence in classes. On the other hand, challenges centered on executive functioning, social issues, difficulties registering with support services, navigating university, and experiencing co-occurring diagnoses.
- Participants rated greater satisfaction with academic supports than non-academic supports.
- 84% of participants indicated they used informal or alternative supports. Among the most helpful were those associated with online communities, family and friends, extra faculty support from faculty, etc.
- Top barriers to supports included the difficulty in registering with student accessibility services (63%), fear of disclosing their diagnosis (70%), and having physical and mental health supports in tandem (90%).

- The team sought input from participants on suggestions to improve supports. Carly said some of them were more idiosyncratic in nature. Among the suggestions included, but were not limited to, better advertising supports, educating teachers on supporting their autistic learners, and creating sensory-friendly study rooms. New supports could entail puppy therapy and peer supports. Most notably, students wanted tailored, individually-designed supports.
- One theme was that students had limited or no access to autism supports that would elevate their overall wellness.
- At other times, students just lacked access to supports because of barriers (e.g., time conflicts).
- The team concludes that, across their work, research needs to be higher in quality, entail participatory practices, bridge research to application, and enhance inclusive leadership and policy development.

Questions & Answers:

- Flor: “I’d love to hear more about the social skills workshops--how do you host them while using a strengths based approach? Do NT students also get cross-identity communication training?”
 - Answer: This was a recommendation offered by students, not necessarily offered. Such workshops may be useful for all stakeholders in higher education. Carly mentioned that at her institution’s peer mentorship program, there can be some anxiety in finding belongingness (e.g., initiating social interaction in group contexts). It’s helpful to think about how to reduce anxiety in new contexts.
- Gina: “Under what departments/divisions does autistic support fall? Health? Student Affairs?”
 - Megan said it varies across Canada. Often they fall under accommodations, and these services need to be expanded across the university community. In the mapping services study, they found that sometimes supports fall within education and psychology spaces.
- Alexandra: “I am really curious about the trajectory of supports, particularly in the context of increasing requests for different kinds of supports and accommodations at university. Are other support requests squeezing out autism support, or are we growing the pie overall?”
 - Although their research may not point that exactly, the Center for Accessible Learning Staff and Administrators is contending for that. Some institutions have added supports since the publication of their article. Funding is very inconsistent.
- Brett: Based on the review of reviews’ themes, how are you adapting your research to fit the needs?
 - Megan mentioned the value of training autistic researchers and engaging in participatory practices as long useful to their body of work.
 - Carly has been thinking about how they have a role in creating a more neuro-inclusive environment in general.
 - Jonathan has said the UK has shifted to be more responsive to autistic individuals’ needs.

Future Meetings for Spring 2025 To Be Announced!