

## **CANVAS Meeting Minutes 2025-05-07**

### **Participants in Attendance:**

- Aley O'Mara
- Amber Davis (Johns Hopkins University)
- Andrea Haas
- Archie K. Morgan (School of Visual Arts)
- Audrey Scaer (Eastern Michigan University)
- Brandon Medrano (College of Staten Island)
- Brett Ranon Nachman (College Autism Network | University of Pittsburgh)
- Cicely Jones
- Colleen Grillo (University of Central Florida)
- Christina Miranda
- Deanna Ferrante
- Emma Ann Taverner (College of Staten Island)
- George Wolford (Appalachian State University)
- Gina Godoy Zambrano (Riverside Community College District)
- Goldhmong Vang (Marquette University)
- Hilary Meyer
- Jennifer
- Jetta Lewis (North Carolina State University)
- Justin-Ray Dutton
- Kelly Coons (College Autism Network)
- Ken Gobbo (Landmark College)
- Lauren Curcio (College of Staten Island)
- Lauren Lestremay Allen
- Lee Williams (College Autism Network)
- Lisa Yates (Moreno Valley College)
- Liza Tomczuk (Drexel University)
- Lori Wischnewsky (Texas State University)
- Mark Tapia
- Meera Rastogi
- Ryan Ellman (College of Staten Island)
- Samantha Alaimo (College of Staten Island)
- Sam Brandsen
- Shea Weekes (Howard University)
- Tanya McClain
- TC Waisman
- Tom Beeson (Clemson University)
- Victoria Morsette

## **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](mailto:can-canvas@collegeautismnetwork.org)
  - [CAN Membership Details](#) We appreciate the support your membership provides to help us offer CANVAS and other opportunities.
  - [College Autism Summit](#): Nov 2-5 in Pittsburgh, PA
  - CAN is sponsoring a four-part webinar series this summer with Inclusive Academia: “College Readiness and Reasonable Expectations for Parents.” [Check out more details here](#).
  - [Square One](#) is a seven-hour class for colleges and universities to develop new autism support programs off the ground. This two-day event takes place on June 11 and June 12.

## **Presentation Details**

**Presenters:** Dr. Sam Brandsen (Research Analyst, Duke University), Shealtiel Weekes (Doctoral Student, Howard University), Liza Tomczuk (Doctoral Student, Drexel University)

**Presentation Title:** Understanding the Experiences of BIPOC Neurodivergent Students in Higher Education

## **Presentation Notes:**

- This project is through a partnership with UCLA.
- The project is supported by federal funding and has asked them to limited recording of this work to external audiences.
- Shea is in the fourth year of a school psychology program at Howard University.
- Liza is completing a doctoral fellowship at the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute. This work is part of the Autism Transition Research project.
- Neurodivergent students often face a variety of barriers in higher education (e.g., inaccessible spaces, adjustments to independent living). This study aims to center the voices of neurodivergent students to support their needs.
- Autistic individuals who are racially or ethnically underrepresented may experience diagnostic disparities, compounded stigma, and multiple minority stress.
- The goal of this work is to better understand the experiences of neurodivergent people of color in higher ed at HBCUs and community colleges, as well as better understand faculty/staff experiences in interacting with them.
- The first phase entailed pre-interviews and focus groups with relevant participants. The team drafted a variety of possible questions. Sam reviewed content and elevated accessibility features and inclusive questions. They recruited participants via Reddit to find 10 paid-one-time consultants who were autistic students of color. Team members met with each student. Later they revised materials and tested out interviews with students and faculty. Initial feedback they gathered entailed points related to including more joy,

adding more explicit questions about race, incorporating more open-ended questions (noted by most), reducing jargon, and thinking about different response trajectories and appropriate responses/resources. One early reflection was that autistic people follow a bimodal distribution: some participants answered all questions in the allotted time, whereas others only handled a few. Consequently, they developed a time-sensitive, adaptive Qualtrics survey that everyone could complete – the most essential ones. In the interview, there was space for back-up questions if they had time to cover more.

- Among Shea's contributions were related to recruitment. They aimed to bring on 25 students and faculty across different disciplines and geographic areas. The team leveraged their network, such as social media platforms like Reddit and Instagram. In particular, they reached out to groups related to autism or People of Color. Personalized messages and follow-ups helped, too.
- The team administered a survey that featured 15 sections on topics including the following: neurodivergence, self-advocacy, knowledge of rights, support systems, distress, minority stress, stigma, strengths, mental health, spare time, societal change, nervous, masking, educational success, and needs assessments.
- Participant selected the format for which they wanted to participate: surveys or interviews. Content was similar across both.
- Ultimately 28 students participated across 13 schools; 22 via Qualtrics and 6 over Zoom.
- Faculty and administrators engaged in semi-structured interviews, discussing their work with teaching or advising neurodivergent learners. 26 faculty and administrator participants came from 19 institutions.
- The team reflected on the value of including autistic people of colour as interviewers and leaders of the project. This would be more participatory as well. Additionally, they would have liked to increase compensation for participants and alleviated participants' anxiety during interviews.
- All student participants indicated that race or ethnicity has played a role in their experiences as autistic. One student in their interview explained how they were concerned about having a meltdown due to stigmas of Black women viewed as loud. This illustrates the minority stress model in action. Meanwhile, another participant shared how being neurodivergent and Black is a source of joy and pride.
- One faculty participant shared how they recognize their students may engage in the classroom in different ways.

### **Questions and Answers:**

- Deanna: "What was included in the identity verification process? I have run into similar fraudulent responses when recruiting."
  - Liza mentioned how she handled pre-screening procedures. First, they asked for .edu email addresses to demonstrate legitimacy. Additionally, they asked them to turn on their camera for pre-screening or share a picture of their student ID or learning management site profile.
- Kelly: "What subreddits did you use to find people? General autism subreddits? General BIPOC subreddits? College-focused subreddits?"
  - Shea shared about Reddit karma, which is a score or reputation that builds over time and with continued engagement.

- They also posted on Instagram profiles that related to autism, People of Colour, and other relevant spaces.
- Brett: How is the work moving forward?
  - Students often expressed that faculty and administrators did not understand their needs or supports, whereas the faculty and administrators held a sense of confidence in their approaches. These campus professionals may very well be different from their counterparts who are not as informed. The team hopes to bridge more gaps across campus constituents, particularly more senior faculty and admin who may not be as well versed.
  - Shae mentioned that the support team needs to be more informed. She shared how in working with students with mental health issues, one needs to have a good toolbox, but not all tools may be appropriate with everyone. That same principle holds here.
  - To their knowledge leadership trainings on autism that they have reviewed have not been led by racially or ethnically minoritized autistic people.

### **Upcoming Presentations**

Join us in July for a two-part special College Autism Network series:

- **Navigating Attrition and Dropout in Autism Research**
  - Tues, July 15 and Tues, July 29 at 12pm-1pm EST
  - [Register here](#) for July 15
  - [Register here](#) for July 29

CANVAS Presentations to Resume in August 2025