

CANVAS Meeting Minutes, 2025-09-18

People in Attendance:

- Adero Allison (Arizona State University)
- Anna Armstrong (Appalachian State University)
- Anna Linnehan
- Andrea Haas
- Audrey Scaer (Eastern Michigan University)
- Beth Felsen (Spectrum Transition Consulting LLC)
- Bethany Bradley (Rochester Institute of Technology)
- Brett Binkowski (Michigan State University)
- Brett Ranon Nachman (College Autism Network | University of Pittsburgh)
- Colleen Grillo
- Dana Jenkins-Post
- Dawn-Marie Solis (Neuroawesome Life)
- Elinor Lim (University of Portsmouth)
- Emine Gurbuz (University of Portsmouth)
- Erin Morpeth-Provost (Florida State University)
- George Wolford (Appalachian State University)
- Gina Hoagland (UMBC)
- Hannah Morton (UNC Chapel Hill)
- Harley Crisp (The Ohio State University)
- Hilary Meyer (Triton College)
- Hunter Mackenzie Mattern (Penn State University)
- Jennifer Williamson (University of Calgary)
- Jo Elda Castillo-Alaniz (Texas A&M University-Kingsville)
- Jodi Duke (George Mason University)
- Karly Ball Isaacson (Michigan State University)
- Katie McDermott
- Kayden Stockwell (University of Virginia)
- Kelly Coons (Franklin Academy)
- Kelly Sears Smith (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign)
- Ken Gobbo (Landmark College)
- Lauren Baczewski (Curry College)
- Lauren Mathews (University of North Texas)
- Lee Williams (College Autism Network)
- Lori Wischnewsky (Texas State University)
- Lynn Cominsky (Sonoma State University)
- Lynn DaSilva (Dean College)
- Megan Riedl (SUNY Canton)
- Michael Ota (Kennesaw State University)
- Rachel Gunderson (Cornell University)
- Steven Kapp (University of Portsmouth)
- Susan Hedges (Appalachian State University)

- Taite Lehov (University of Toronto)

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.
 4. [College Autism Summit](#): Nov 2-5 in Pittsburgh, PA
- **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!
 - Dawn-Marie Solais: "I just posted my latest YouTube conversation, and the topic was research about whether or not self-identity in autism is valid." https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQ_EJvm--KnAkx1QR85rSIK48p2sbpm5H&si=YtIrFDZr9GsvNqbO
 - Audrey Scaer has co-authored a new book, which you can check out here: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/understanding-and-affirming-autistic-clients-9798881806804/>

Presentation Details

Presenters: Katie Tobin McDermott – Consultant, Karly Ball Isaacson – Michigan State University

Presentation Title: Belonging on Their Terms: Friendship Experiences of Autistic College Students

Presentation Description: This presentation highlights autistic undergraduate college students' perspectives on friendship using data from PEACES project, a national longitudinal, mixed methods study. We present key findings related to participants' engagement in autistic spaces, practicing autistic authenticity, and bonding over shared interests. Drawing from these findings, we discuss strategies for higher education professionals and researchers to support belonging among this unique student group.

Article Link: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00221546.2025.2497184>

Presentation Notes:

- The PEACES study has involved curating surveys from more than 1,000 participants across three waves, as well as 77 interviews and 36 photovoice submissions.

- Existent literature shows the value of affinity spaces in building bonds and solidarity for marginalized communities, as well as the risks and concerns associated with disclosure.
- The theoretical framework that guided this work is Vaccaro and colleagues' 2015 model of belonging for college students with disabilities. However, this study on friendship focuses on belongingness among undergraduate education, a national sample, and specifically on autism.
- The multi-pronged recruitment approach aimed to elevate perspectives of autistic individuals who are often not accounted for in research.
- The team employed maximum variation sampling, which entailed prioritizing reaching out to underrepresented communities in autism work, including women and students of color. They contacted 72 students and 43 participated in Wave 2.
- Interviews averaged 63 minutes; they focused on a variety of topics, though for this paper the focus is on friendship.
- Interview participants for Wave 2 included 63% people of color, 42% women, 33% transgender, 81% who did not identify as straight/heterosexual, 19% current community college students, and 49% transferred from a community college.
- The team engaged in member checking through sending back summaries of interviews to participants to review, as well as conducted interview memos.
- Following AASPIRE principles allowed for honoring the ways in which autistic study participants may comfortably engage in research studies.
- The team includes autistic and/or neurodivergent authors.
- The first theme related to engagement in autistic spaces as a mechanism for building friendship. 15/43 participants engaged in autism support programs, which offered kinship and relatability. Some students were also making sense of their autism diagnoses.
- Katie highlighted quotes from participants who felt affirmed and supported in autistic settings, where they felt liberated.
- The second theme: practicing autistic authenticity. Like neurotypical peers, autistic college students seek to weed out unsupportive figures and prioritize peers who are patient and kind. These relationships offered opportunities for unmasking. One participant expressed an anecdote about giving a presentation about autistic college students and being appreciated by peers. Autistic authenticity can yield rewards in good situations, but also feel draining.
- The third theme: bonding over shared interests. Students exhibited a variety of skills and passions. Some advocated for themselves and others (via student organizations or groups), allowing for friendships to form, whereas others found peers who shared the same interests.
- This study extends new understandings around how autistic college students find friends, including the importance of participating in clubs or autistic spaces, as well as even engaging in online spaces based on similar fandom.
- Unmasking can come with benefits and risks depending on the situation. Yet participants expressed how disclosing their diagnoses could enhance their relationships with peers.
- The team encourages practitioners to provide info about clubs throughout the year and communicate information across a variety of ways to meet students' comfort. Presenting info in plain language is helpful, too.

- Encouraging neurotypical students to take initiative in serving as allies is also a good practice.
- The team sees merit in longitudinal research over time.
- Katie and Karly concluded by engaging attendees in an activity, asking what they think help facilitate autistic students' friendships"
 - Kelly mentioned the value of speed friending events
 - Susan shared the value of sensory-friendly spaces in the library or quiet areas in the dining room
 - Michael relayed the value of peer mentors
 - Beth: "When I work with incoming college students, we try to check out the student activities web page to see what might be available on campus. I find these sites are often outdated or lack contact information for clubs. Getting those sites updated could be very helpful for autistic students heading to your campus."
- If interested in submitting a proposal to request access to some of the PEACES data, take these steps
 - **Review the list of [available variables](#)** (from Wave 1; similar Wave 2 variables available)
 - **Set up a 25-min meeting with Dr. Brad Cox** (PI; Michigan State University) via [Calendly](#) to share what your interests entail

Presentation Q&A:

- Michael: "Does autistic spaces mean only autistics or supportive peers?"
 - Answer: "Good question! These could also include supportive peers, though most folks tended to focus on the bonds they formed with other autistic folks in these spaces."
- Kelly Sears Smith asked about how to support autistic college students who may struggle in reaching out to and making friends, even after many attempts.
 - Katie acknowledged the difficulty of such situations. One takeaway she gleaned from the study is the variety of pathways that autistic students take to make friends, including within physical campus settings, via online spaces, and in nature.
 - Brett shared how that some autistic students in the study illustrated the trial and nature element of friendships, as well as following special interests to find viable professional directions. Friendships and colleagues may result as a byproduct.
 - Kelly Coons said that she equips autistic high-schoolers with the idea that they must not agree with everything that others share and assume best intent.
- Adero mentioned that in class situations colleagues focus on the value of networking and social opportunities, as well as figuring out how and when to chime in during other individuals' conversations.

Upcoming Presentations

Date: Tues, Oct 14 at 10am EST

Presenters: Dr. So Yoon Kim (Assistant Professor of Diversity and Special Education, Korea University) and Dr. Shannon LaPoint, Assistant Professor of Special Education, Florida State University)

Presentation Title: Transitions, Adjustments, and Persistence: Autistic Undergraduates Navigating Higher Education

Presentation Description: Drawing from two in-depth qualitative studies, this presentation highlights autistic undergraduates' experiences of transition, adjustment, and persistence in college. Early transition was shaped by proximity to home, family support, new social relationships, transition programs, structural changes from high school, and logistical barriers such as transportation and housing. Students felt adjusted after developing familiarity with campus routines, achieving academic success, and forming meaningful peer connections. Persistence was driven by intrinsic motivation, the value of a degree, and family expectations. Findings highlight the need for autism-tailored, neurodiversity-affirming transition programs, proactive academic advising that fosters routine, predictability, and engagement with academic interests, and expanded peer engagement opportunities to help students navigate college and persist.

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Date: Fri, Nov 21 at 11am ET

Presenters: Elinor Lim, PhD Candidate, University of Portsmouth

Presentation Title: The Role and Impact of Family in Autistic Students' University Journeys

Presentation Description: This presentation will discuss findings from 3 studies conducted during my PhD: A scoping review on the role of family for autistic higher education students; an interview study on autistic students' family relationships and family support; and a quantitative online survey exploring links between autistic students' family support and student outcomes. I will also share reflections on the participatory elements of this research (steering group; consultation) as well as implications of the studies' findings.