

CANVAS Meeting Minutes, 2025-10-14

People in Attendance:

- Adva Waranyuwat (UMass Amherst)
- Aley O'Mara (UMass Amherst)
- Alice Feldman (UMass Amherst)
- Andrea Haas
- Anna Barry
- Brett Ranon Nachman (University of Pittsburgh | College Autism Network)
- Breyana Roman (UMass Amherst)
- Brian Strauss
- Clarissa Barnes
- Cody Olson (UMass Amherst)
- Emily Rodgers (UMass Amherst)
- Erin Morpeth-Provost
- Gina Hoagland (University of Maryland Baltimore County)
- Jackie Brousseau-Pereira
- Kate Lukasavage (SUNY Ulster Community College)
- Kathy Szechy (University of Windsor)
- Kelly Matthew (Holyoke Community College)
- Ken Gobbo (Landmark College)
- Lauren Baczewski (Curry College)
- Lauren Lestremau Allen (SUNY Empire State University)
- Lee Williams (College Autism Network)
- LizAnette Perez
- Lyn Broyles (UMass Amherst)
- Lynne DaSilva (University of Texas Rio Grande Valley)
- Margot Margarones
- Maria Montenegro
- Michael Canale (University of Maryland Baltimore County)
- Michael Westort
- Nancy Chomitz
- Pedro Badillo
- Peter Woodsum (UMass Amherst)
- Samina Mian (UMass Amherst)
- Shannon LaPoint (Florida State University)
- Sharon Thompson
- So Yoon Kim (Korea University)
- Vanessa Blais
- Vanessa Doyle

Meeting Plan

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.
 - [College Autism Summit](#): Nov 2-5 in Pittsburgh, PA

Presentation Details

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 Notes:

- This comes from a dataset in 2019 as part of Dr. Kim's dissertation. Three different articles came from this project: one about experiences about disability support offices, another on transition and adjustment, and the last on intentions to persist. This presentation draws on the findings from the articles on transition/adjustment and intention to persist.
- The team put out a prompt: what can be handled at the department, faculty, and researcher level to implement the types of supports identified in this study?
- They aimed to share how different supports are needed at each phase of an autistic college student's journey.
- In covering existent literature, Dr. Kim noted how transition is viewed as involving changes to routine, relationships, and assumptions, in which students experience stress related to autism and their intersecting identities. In tandem, they are in this stage of emerging adulthood. Much dropout unfolds during the first year. They must also deal with adjusting to the new environment, for which there is limited research.
- Research continues to show that autistic college students experience lots of barriers that impact negative experiences and dropout. Intent to persist is commonly used in the literature. There is less known about autistic college students in this space.
- To recruit students, the team reached out to 30 institutions from each tier of the K&W Guide, which denotes programs for students with learning differences. They were targeting community colleges; alas, no students from these institutions participated in the study.
- They ultimately had 26 students from 15 institutions.
- 26% of students had co-occurring ADHD.
- They conducted semi-structured interviews with participants online, sharing questions in advance. Two coders independently open-coded half of the transcripts to form codes. From there, they grouped codes into subthemes, later reorganizing subthemes into 12 broader themes.

Member checking unfolded with two participants, whereas two researchers reviewed the design and findings. This presentation focuses on three of the broader themes.

- The findings first focused on factors influencing transition. More than half of the participants expressed negative experiences. One factor centered on the role of geographic proximity to home and family support, how staying in the area eased the transition. Another factor: engaging in structured transition programs was very helpful in easing the process. Differences between high school and college created challenges in feeling unprepared and self-advocating for themselves. Practical issues included figuring out housing, transportation, and navigating campus. Having social relationships on campus aided students' progress; on the other hand, struggling to meet new people could be compromising.
- There were also factors impacting perception of adjustment. Developing daily schedules and learning management strategies supported students' transitions. Becoming more familiarized with campus also behooved them. Positive academic experiences included a reasonable class size and having positive faculty connections. When students could engage with others and develop friendships, they felt more at ease. Finding nontraditional social connections led them to feel more adjusted.
- Among the factors that supported persistence were having a desire to learn, seeing a practical utility of the college degree (i.e., it serving as a stepping stone for their career), feeling a sense of accomplishment (especially for nontraditional learners), and having family who valued a college degree.
- The authors denote similarities between autistic and non-autistic students in their adjustments. While social relationships were not a major theme for persistence, they found alternative ways to engage in making friends. Autistic individuals have distinct challenges in college related to stress and social experiences, yet also distinctive strengths related to their motivation and focusing on tight social communities. The authors contend that supports should account for each unique stage.
- Dr. LaPoint reinforced how autistic students benefit from having structured supports and family/peer networks who can offer additional resources during students' transitional periods. To ease their adjustments, helping students figure out routines that work for them is useful. Similarly, if they can participate in academic environments where faculty are supportive and offer clear guidance, autistic students benefit from that. To aid persistence, autistic students require multifaceted motivation and need milestones to be celebrated.
- They reinforced that institution-level supports are the key lever.
- The authors recognized that this study lacked community college representation. Additionally, self-selection bias may have influenced participation, thus limiting involvement among those who are less connected to supports. They also shared that the study did not follow a Community-Based Participatory Research process, as well as did not focus on students' identities.
- Implications for research include the need for longitudinal studies, larger, multi-institutional studies, cross-cultural research, and intervention research.

Q&A:

- Jackie: "It seems like your participants were willing to disclose their autism diagnoses to you. Do you think the disclosure makes a difference in ability to persist in college?"
 - Could be related, though hard to say for sure. Then again, participants may not be sharing with folks outside of the research study context. Students who were returning to

college after a gap were using more self-advocacy skills this time around. Dr. LaPoint said it could be useful for high schools and transition programs to talk about pros/cons of disclose.

- Kathy: “Were some of the comments about the preference for socializing in smaller more tight-knit social communities about socializing with other autistic adults or other non-autistic adults? – totally fine if you don’t have that data. I was just wondering...”
 - Kind of a mix of both. One participant mentioned that meeting another autistic individual recharged “their social battery.” In general, having smaller groups of people who could accept them is what mattered.
- Lee: “A recent discussion with autism support program leaders surfaced an interesting observation: students seem reluctant to join "peer mentor" programs. But the desire for socializing is very evident. I wonder if you think the term "peer mentor" has run its course, or become negatively viewed.”
 - Dr. LaPoint drew from anecdotal evidence of speaking with students more recently that students did not want a peer mentor, per se, but more of having a space of connecting with other students connected to their interests. Dr. Kim mentioned that building authentic relationships matters a lot.
- Maria: “Any ideas on how to educate faculty and staff members in a way that benefits students (e.g., getting the info to students on what faculty has been trained)?”
 - It might be difficult to acquaint students with which faculty have received training. That said, elevating more institutional awareness around autism could be useful. Engaging in case studies can also be useful in training faculty. Dr. LaPoint said some of her work involves engaging with adjunct community college faculty and aiming to provide them with email templates to incorporate into their courses.
- Lauren: “Love the idea of offices reaching out to students, Shannon! A question for you both—do you think that these phases of transition, adjustment, and persistence are fluid (happening across years) among autistic students or are they more ‘time bound’?”
 - They indeed see it as more fluid. Students may return back to transition periods in entering the second year of college, for instance. It’s a back-and-forth process, especially in having new faculty, new roommates, or experiencing other novel experiences.

Upcoming Presentation

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.