

CANVAS Meeting Notes

February 19, 2026

People in Attendance:

- Aley O'Mara (SUNY Empire State University)
- Andrew Begel (Carnegie Mellon University)
- Ann Jusino (St. John's University)
- Ashley R
- Beth Felsen (Spectrum Transition Coaching)
- Brady Esham (Boston University)
- Brett Ranon Nachman (College Autism Network | University of Pittsburgh)
- Colleen Grillo (University of Central Florida)
- Elinor Lim (University of Portsmouth)
- Elizabeth Green (Link Consulting and Neurohub Learning)
- Jina Chun (University of Wisconsin-Madison)
- Joon Jang (Carnegie Mellon University)
- Lee Williams (College Autism Network)
- Maria Montenegro (UT-Rio Grande Valley)
- Mark Tapia
- Michelle Kamin (St. Joseph's University)
- Pamela Childers (Santa Fe College)
- Raeneeva Davis (Tri-County Technical College)
- Ren Butler (Carnegie Mellon University)
- Sadie Owocki
- Sara Sanders Gardner (Bellevue College)
- Scott Brooks (Saint Joseph's University)
- Shevaun Lewis (University of Maryland)
- Summer West (Universität Kassel & College of Staten Island)
- Susanne Bruyere (Cornell University)
- Taite Lehov (University of Toronto)
- Tamara Garfield (Drexel University)
- TC Waisman (Autism Training Academy)
- Tom Utiger
- Trent Kocurek (Equip)
- Vanessa Blais (UMass Amherst)
- Young Ji Kim (University of California, Santa Barbara)

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!
 - Trent: "We just received a grant from Auburn University to enhance our AI capabilities in our platform Equip. Really excited to be able to work with so many organizations supporting individuals working toward greater independence and employment."
 - Elizabeth: "HI everyone, I'm Liz Green. I'm an Occupational therapist and founder of Neurohub Learning, a digital platform that combines micro-learning and live access to neurodiversity-affirming healthcare and employment experts to help neurodivergent young adults prevent burnout and get hired. We are doing some free pilot testing with partnering uni's so pls message me if interested. <https://www.linktalent.org/neurohub-learning> , liz@linktalent.org"
 - [AHEAD Academy](#) on "A Neurodiversity Framework for Culturally Responsive Disability Support" hosted on March 9 by Sara Sanders Gardner and Emily Raclaw
 - Brady has started a new company called [Albus NeuroPolicy Solutions](#)
 - Joon is working with a start-up that provides neuro-affirming care for young neurodivergent professionals, hosting events in Philadelphia and New York. Contact Joon for more info: jwoongj@andrew.cmu.edu
 - Taite shared that the University of Toronto has run a [Career Pathways for Neurodivergent Students workshop](#), in which they focus on career skills.

Presentation Details

Presenters: Ren Butler (PhD Student, Carnegie Mellon University), JiWoong Jang (PhD Student, Carnegie Mellon University), and Dr. Andrew Begel (Associate Professor, Carnegie Mellon University)

Presentation Title: Preparing Autistic Students for the AI Workforce: Weaving Technical Skills with Social-Emotional Learning

Presentation Notes:

- [View the slides if interested here.](#)
- In this presentation, the team provided context on how to help autistic individuals succeed professionally and academically, what the PAS4AI program entails, and how they have worked to navigate the SEL landscape.
- Their work is grounded in thinking about how to support autistic individuals achieve competitive integrated employment (CIE). This is super relevant due to thinking about the high levels of unemployment among autistic adults. AI is increasingly important to the job market, thus requiring software developers to think about how to address changes. The confluence of all these factors has helped inspire their work to build autistic students'

familiarity with this evolving industry. The team has wanted to figure out how to diminish sensory and communication barriers and promote self-advocacy for individuals with diverse needs.

- The PAS4AI program is an online course meant to support autistic students develop technical and social-emotional skills for careers in artificial intelligence (AI).
- They illustrated a graphic with a squirrel and beaver to depict the double empathy problem, in that two groups are often not aligned. Often autistic people are othered for not communicating or behaving like their non-autistic colleagues.
- Their course taught technical skills related to working in AI.
- They designed a five-week-long flipped classroom course for autistic community college students. They engaged with various materials and readings on their own time, whereas synchronous time was allocated for more discussions. Course topics covered everything from data science methods to LLM applications. Throughout they grounded course content in Universal Design for Learning (UDL). For instance, students could deliver either pre-recorded or live presentations. They wanted to accommodate different learning styles from the start.
- A typical day of the course had a mix of activities for students.
- The course drew on Google Colab and GitHub classroom tools, which allowed for great interactivity.
- Zoom classrooms and Discord channels allowed for autistic students to communicate with one another and pose questions.
- Communication skills centered on everything from reading to speaking and listening to teaming.
- Technical skills of focus included machine learning, deep learning (e.g., neural networks), large language models, and AI ethics.
- The course started with foundational information and team formation. From there attention shifted to course concepts, giving/receiving feedback, exploring large language models, prepping for their internship, and showcasing their projects.
- Classrooms offered predictable routines to reduce anxiety.
- Activities allowed for students to hone in on communication skills and technical knowledge in tandem.
- Scaffolding helped students not have to deal with uncertain situations on the fly.
- Examples of projects that the students came up with ranged considerably. For instance, one was developing a Spotify playlist.
- 13/15 student participants recorded higher self-efficacy, and 12/13 secured AI internships.
- Joon mentioned running into a past program participant at a conference; the participant said they were so comfortable with introducing themselves now.
- Neurodivergent students were more confident in their identities.
- Internship managers expressed appreciation for the level of preparation and communication skills students demonstrated. Similarly, most were favorable about students' technical skills.
- Common challenges included communication diversity and integration difficulty. They need to focus more on emotional support needs.
- One takeaway is that communication skills must be taught explicitly.

- Ren shared how engineers rely on social-emotional skills, which range from internal factors (e.g., personal character and decision making) to external factors (teammate interactions and creating software).
- Neurodiversity offers challenges and opportunities for work in STEM; for instance, whereas engineers may have awareness of people and organization norms, neurodivergent folks may not. The overlaps manifest in their common attentiveness to concentration and fine detail processing.
- Current AI education can emphasize technical skill acquisition, and leave out important social skills.
- They wanted to know what social-emotional challenges do students and instructors encounter in collaborative AI education.
- Students found self-advocacy challenging in terms of both disclosing their needs and when disagreeing with colleagues.
- Instructors noted challenges with student communication (e.g., reliance on instructors to manage dialogues) and facing emotional labor in adaptive instruction based on not knowing what their students' needs were.
- Among the implications include rethinking communication and collaboration and considering the emotional labor of work.
- Their ongoing work entails exploring how do neurodivergent students envision using AI for team social-emotional wellbeing in collaborative work.
- Their core message is to help autistic students succeed professionally with holistic skill development in a safe environment, constructed through collective and accessible practices.

Q&A:

- **Brady:** What recommendations would you have for younger students?
 - Answer: Simplified materials, yet still emphasizing the social-emotional skills component, would be very helpful. Make the design challenge relevant to their lives.
- **Michelle:** “If you could give one piece of advice to computer science/STEM/AI faculty in colleges to better support Autistic students, what would it be?”
 - Answer: Have an appreciation or understanding of the psychological and safety concerns that many autistic students bring to the classroom.
- **Tom:** The changing nature of AI and what is considered foundational makes it difficult. How can you create a safe environment to deal with the incredibly rapid changes that unfold?
 - Answer: The technical aspects of the curriculum attend to the variable aspects. Foundational skills are time-tested and applicable to students throughout their careers.

Upcoming CANVAS Presentations

Date: Thurs, March 19 at 12pm EST

Meeting Link: <https://pitt.zoom.us/j/93802222514>

Presenters: Dr. Karen R. Johnson (Associate Professor, University of North Texas) and Dr. Barbara Pazez (Associate Professor, University of North Texas)

Presentation Title: Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Experiences of Autistic University Students: Informing the Future of Higher Education

Presentation Description: The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed how universities delivered courses and support services, creating challenges for autistic students who rely heavily on structure and predictability. This presentation shares findings from a qualitative narrative study of four autistic university students, highlighting how changes in access, communication, and support affected their academic experiences. Practical recommendations are offered for higher education administrators and disability service providers to improve accessibility, maintain consistent supports, and better meet the needs of autistic and the broader neurodivergent student population as learning environments continue to evolve.

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Date: Tues, April 14 at 12pm ET

Meeting Link: <https://pitt.zoom.us/j/93794054859>

Presenters: Dr. Brittany E. Hayes (Associate Professor, University of Cincinnati), Francesco DiRienzo (Graduate Student, University of Cincinnati), Dr. Cooper A. Maher (Assistant Professor, Michigan State University), and Dr. Leah E. Daigle (Professor, Georgia State University)

Presentation Title: Victimization Among Autistic College Students

Presentation Description: Autistic college students face elevated risks of multiple forms of victimization. This presentation examines the victimization experiences among autistic college students. The presentation concludes with implications for campus policy, prevention programming, and tailored supports to better protect and support autistic students in higher education.

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Date: Tues, May 12 at 11am ET

Presenters: Dr. Clive Trusson (Senior Lecturer, Loughborough University) and Dr. Cheryl Travers (Reader, Loughborough University)

Presentation Title: Autistic Students' Experiences of Employment and Employability Support While Studying at a UK University: Lessons for Higher Education

Presentation Description: We report on a study that was primarily conducted for internal purposes of better supporting autistic students studying business programmes which mandated a one-year placement/internship. Twelve autistic students completed an in-depth online qualitative survey. Analysis revealed several themes/findings: placements are highly valued; underlying self-confidence; common workplace difficulties; support incoherence and deficiency; and a capacity to self-advocate support requirements. Recommendations for HE include: provision of expert coaching (e.g. on disclosure, coping techniques and advocacy of needs), regular check-ins during placements, peer-support, and maintaining a database of 'autism-friendly' employers. The study was published in 'Autism in Adulthood'.