

Bridging the Gap: A Qualitative Analysis of Academic and Social Barriers for Autistic Students in Higher Education

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Background:

- **Current Landscape:** College campuses are seeing a record number of autistic students, yet most institutions rely on basic legal compliance rather than genuine inclusion.
- **Existing Research:** Previous studies show these students face significant academic and social barriers, specifically regarding faculty communication, classroom sensory overload, and complex accommodation systems.
- **The Problem:** A massive gap exists between "standard" university resources and the actual support autistic students need to succeed. More than half of autistic post-secondary students endorse poor quality of sleep, anxiety, and depression as at least a moderate level of concern, yet few report ever receiving counseling services.
- **Research Approach:** This study fills that gap by conducting qualitative interviews with both students and counselors to provide a comprehensive view of the current system's failures.
- **Objective:** To examine the lived experiences of autistic students and counseling staff within the community college environment. To develop actionable recommendations to eliminate institutional barriers and enhancing support systems for autistic community college students.
- **Outcome:** Using thematic coding of lived experiences, we are developing and testing an Autism-Informed Toolkit for staff to improve student engagement, academic success, and overall belonging.

Methods:

- Conducted semi-structured interviews with 9 autistic students (28-55 years old) and 4 counseling staff (18-59 years old)
- Most counselors and autistic participants identified as women
- Participants were asked to describe their experiences as an autistic college student or supporting autistic students, and how autistic students can be better supported in the community college environment.
- Zoom interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, deidentified, and analyzed iteratively using Braun and Clarke's 6-phase reflexive thematic analysis.



Results:

- Qualitative coding revealed three primary barriers: inconsistent faculty communication, frequent sensory overload in academic spaces, and high administrative burden in navigating accommodation systems.
- While 100% of student participants utilized standard accommodations, all reported that these did not address social integration or sensory regulation needs.
- Interview data showed that while counselors provide mandated services, there is a lack of specialized training for non-academic "lived experience" support.

Conclusions & Significance

- This study addressed the gap between "check-box" legal compliance and the actual support required for neurodivergent success in higher education.
- The results signify that current institutional frameworks are reactive rather than proactive; true inclusion requires shifting toward a neurodiversity-affirming model.
- By listening to lived experiences, institutions can move beyond basic access to foster genuine academic belonging and improved mental health outcomes.

Project Status & Evaluation

- This project is currently in the "Toolkit Development" phase. The research question is being answered through the iterative design of faculty resources.
- Strength: High-depth data from direct "lived experience" interviews with both students and staff.
- Limitation: Small sample size (n=13) focused on a specific community college environment may limit broad generalizability.
- Future considerations include expanding the study to include larger university settings to compare support availability.
 - o Evaluate the long-term effectiveness of the Autism-Informed Toolkit on student retention rates and GPA.
 - o Investigate the role of peer-led neurodivergent support groups as a supplement to faculty-led interventions.



Discussion:

Explanation of findings

- The findings suggest that many challenges faced by autistic college students stem from systemic barriers rather than individual deficits.
- The results further reinforced the necessity to move beyond legal compliance in regards to supporting autistic students and develop an emphasis on neurodiversity affirming practices.
- Student and counselor perspectives highlighted the critical role of clear communication, sensory-aware environments, and proactive support.

Comparison to prior research

- The findings align with existing literature identifying communication barriers, sensory overload, and accommodation access as major challenges for autistic students.
- This study extends prior research by incorporating both student and counselor perspectives and translating findings into a practical toolkit.

Limitations of the study

- Due to the fact that the study utilized qualitative data, it is possible that results will not generalize to all autistic college students.
- Self reported experiences may be susceptible to recall or response biases.

Implications of Results

- Results indicate the need for training related to autism awareness and inclusion for faculty and staff at colleges and universities.
- Using toolkit based interventions may positively impact academic engagement and a sense of belonging for autistic college students.

References:

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