

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

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Background

Autistic students are enrolling in community college at record numbers. Although this increase is promising, previous studies reveal that once enrolled, these students face significant academic, social, and institutional barriers. Examples include differences in student-faculty communication, sensory overload on campus, and complex accommodation systems. Furthermore, 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. Autistic students who do seek help often encounter a 'competency gap,' where campus counselors feel ill-equipped or under-trained to provide neuro-inclusive support.

Objectives

The aims of the current study are to:

1. Examine the lived experiences of autistic students within the community college context
2. Describe the counseling center staff members' experience supporting autistic community college students.
3. Develop actionable recommendations to eliminate institutional barriers and enhance support systems for autistic community college students
4. Create *Campus Connections*, an interactive virtual toolkit designed to support counselors in providing best practices to support autistic students' well-being

Methods

- Conducted semi-structured interviews with 9 autistic students (18-59 years old, $M = 26.1$ y) and 4 counseling staff (28-55 years old, $M = 36.8$ y)
- Most counselors (75%) and autistic participants (67%) 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.



Participant interview responses were analyzed and used to support the development of *Campus Connections*.

Results

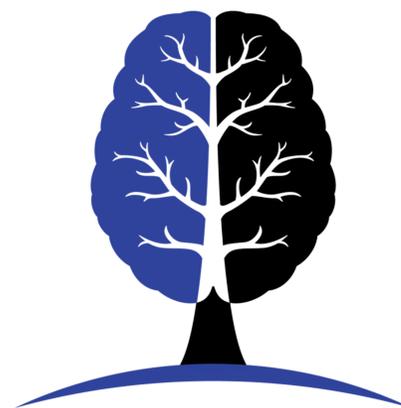
- Qualitative coding revealed three primary barriers: inconsistent faculty communication, frequent sensory overload in academic spaces, and high administrative burden in navigating accommodation systems.
- While 100% of student participants utilized standard accommodations, all reported that these did 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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