FEATURE ARTICLE

Empowering Autistic College Students: Recommendations Based on a Review of the Literature and Existing Support Programs

Lori A. Wischnewsky, *Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Texas State University*

https://doi.org/10.58997/fa3

ABSTRACT

A review of 29 juried journal articles from 2009–2022, among other sources, found that autistic students face numerous systemic barriers to success in postsecondary settings. Despite autistic students being academically prepared, many are not persisting and completing a postsecondary program. Major findings from the literature include the benefits of additional support for autistic students in the areas of executive functioning skills, self-regulation, mental health, social, and communication skills. Additionally, the research indicates that by offering additional support services, colleges and universities can decrease the systemic barriers to success that autistic students face. The author also discusses the available autism-specific support programs that provide additional services amongst this growing population of students.

Keywords: autism, student success, postsecondary, autism-specific programs, academic supports

According to the Center for Disease Control (2022), one in 44 children have a diagnosis of autism, and since the year 2000, the number of school-age autistic children has increased from 90,000 to over 650,000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The increase in diagnosis is attributed to several factors, but primarily to an increase in awareness of autism and recognition of milder forms of autism (Barnhill, 2016; Longtin, 2014; Van Hees et al., 2015).

The medical model defines autism as a neurodevelopmental disability that affects social and communication skills and sensory processing, and can include repetitive behaviors and limited interests (Barnhill, 2016; Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020), whereas the social model views autism as a naturally occurring variant of human development that does not need to be cured or fixed (Kapp et al., 2012). The neurodiversity movement, which embraces the social model of disability, contends that it is the environment that needs to change to accommodate normal variations in human development with a focus on quality of life instead of normalization (Garcia, 2021).

As the number of autistic college students increases, so does the need for postsecondary support programs to provide nonacademic accommodations for them.

Throughout this paper, I use identity-first language (i.e., autistic person) to describe autistic students. I recognize that this is a controversial topic, and, in some circles, person-first language is preferred (i.e., person with autism). I have chosen to use identity-first language based on the preferences of the autistic community (Botha et al., 2021; Bury et al., 2020; Kapp et al., 2013; Kenny et al., 2016; Vivanti, 2020). This article is informed by neurodivergent authors and researchers and has been reviewed and edited by autistic and neurodivergent colleagues.

As the number of autistic college students increases, so does the need for postsecondary support programs to provide nonacademic accommodations for them. In the 2017–2018 school year, 72% of autistic students graduated with a general high school diploma, making them eligible to attend a postsecondary institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Widman and Lopez-Reyna (2020) reported that 78% of 4-year public institutions and 70% of 2-year public institutions served autistic students. However, the graduation rate for autistic students is lower than for their neurotypical peers. Only 38.8% of autistic students completed a postsecondary program as compared to 60% of neurotypical students (Kuder & Accardo, 2018).

Corresponding Author
Lori A. Wischnewsky, Texas State University
ASBN 401, 601 University Dr.
San Marcos, TX 78666
Email: lp1190@txstate.edu

Autistic students are entitled to appropriate accommodations in postsecondary settings; however, the available supports do not address the nonacademic barriers to succeeding and receiving support. Postsecondary institutions that admit autistic students should be prepared to meet their needs through programs that target areas in which autistic students may need additional support. By working with autistic students to identify the barriers to their success, colleges and universities can improve outcomes for autistic students.

Academic Preparedness and Supports

Autistic students are noted as being academically prepared for their coursework and often have average to above-average intelligence. Their academic strengths include an intense focus on interests, dedication to the truth, and following rules (Dymond et al., 2017). Autistic students are known for having an excellent memory and a detail-oriented focus (Hillier et al., 2020). Van Hees et al. (2015) listed "strong memory, focus precision, dedication, analytic skills, remarkable powers of observation, sincerity, impartiality, and willingness to listen to others" (p. 1677) as the greatest strengths for autistic students. Autistic students may demonstrate strong logical and systematic cognitive processing skills that align well with the skills needed to excel in STEM subjects (Robertson & Ne'eman, 2008). As self-advocates, autistic students have raised awareness of autism and neurodiversity on their college campuses and in their communities (Robertson & Ne'eman, 2008). They have utilized social media and the internet to raise awareness about autism, to confront stereotypes, and to create vast support networks around the world. These strengths benefit them in their academic and personal pursuits. Even though autistic students are typically academically prepared for college and bring many strengths to the classroom, they face barriers to completing postsecondary programs.

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The discrepancy regarding completion rates is attributed to a lack of appropriate institutional support services to address areas of need for autistic students (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). According to Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014), 47% of autistic students enroll in higher education within six years of graduating high school but only 35% of those students earn a degree within a similar time frame. Comparatively, 40% of all 18–24-year-olds enrolled in higher education within 6 years of graduating high school, and 64% of those students graduated with a degree or certificate within 6 years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). It should be noted that the discrepancies in completion rates do not account for higher education being designed for neurotypical students, which causes autistic students to be penalized—often through grades—when they exhibit neurodivergent behaviors. Therefore, these lower graduation rates do not paint an accurate picture of the abilities and strengths that autistic students bring to the classroom.

Institution-Oriented Barriers to Success

Colleges and universities are designed to serve the needs of neurotypical students. The academic expectations and social norms are based on the abilities, behaviors, and social mores of the neurotypical community. These expectations do not naturally accommodate for neurodivergent responses, behaviors, and abilities. This inflexible social structure alienates and stigmatizes autistic students and results in a number of institutional barriers to success.

Legal Accommodations and Barriers to Access

College students with disabilities, including autism, are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, the American with Disabilities Amendments Act (ADAA) of 2008, and 504C of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (504C). Under these laws, autistic students are guaranteed equal access to education, programs, services, facilities, and activities. In K–12 environments, students with disabilities are protected under 504C and IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (1997). IDEA guarantees students with disabilities a free and appropriate education and access to accommodations which promote success in the classroom. The significant differences between K–12 and postsecondary protections are that ADA provides equitable access to education while IDEA promotes success in the classroom (Brown & Coomes, 2016). In K–12, educators can alter the criteria and curriculum for autistic students whereas, in postsecondary environments, accommodations do not allow for altering the curriculum or course requirements.

According to xMinds, common accommodations for autistic students under IDEA include task analysis (i.e., breaking big tasks into smaller tasks),

modified lessons, providing notes and outlines for lessons, reduced distraction testing environments, social skills training, decreased workloads, sensory breaks, and peer mentoring (xMinds, n.d.). In higher education, typical accommodations include extended time on tests, note-takers, recorded lectures, early access to PowerPoints, preferential seating, reduced courseload, and frequent breaks (Brown & Coomes, 2016). The academic accommodations are similar across K–12 and higher education; however, college students lose supports in the areas of executive functioning, self-regulation, social skills, emotional regulation, and sensory processing.

In postsecondary settings, students must self-advocate, though few have been taught to do so during their K–12 experiences (Barnhill, 2016; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; McMorris et al., 2019; Petcu et al., 2021). Neurotypical students frequently have key communication and help-seeking skills to make the process of self-advocating and utilizing campus resources smoother. Whereas autistic students may have difficulty communicating their needs, asking for help, and managing multiple tasks such as seeking services through campus resources (Barnhill, 2016; McMorris et al., 2019; Petcu et al., 2021). These difficulties result in unintended barriers to access for the services to which they are entitled under ADA.

The process to acquire accommodations can be lengthy and involve multiple steps. Autistic students—as well as any student with a qualifying disability—are responsible for requesting accommodations through disability services, providing the needed documentation, and then communicating their accommodations to faculty and staff (Dymond et al., 2017). Parents and guardians cannot provide the same level of support as in K–12 settings without the student signing a release under the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974. Without the appropriate support, autistic students are less likely to communicate accommodations and disclose their disability due to the stigma related to having a disability and past negative experiences with self-disclosure (Petcu et al., 2021). Though autistic students are entitled to appropriate accommodations in the postsecondary environment, there are many systemic barriers to accessing and utilizing the services.

Executive Functioning and Self-Regulation

Under IDEA, autistic students can receive supports for executive functioning and self-regulation. These types of accommodations do not extend to higher education under ADA or 504C. Executive functioning skills are a key determinant of success in college and allow a student to navigate complex tasks like requesting and accessing accommodations (Stark & Lindo, 2022). Executive functioning skills include using working memory, having cognitive flexibility and inhibitory control, and employing time management, organization, and planning (Dijkhuis et al., 2017; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Hillier et al., 2020; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Longtin, 2014). One of the most important skills associated with executive function is self-regulation, which is used to evaluate, control, and respond to one's thoughts, actions, and emotions (Kennedy, 2017). Autistic students who exhibit decreased executive functioning and self-regulatory skills may miss class, not turn in assignments on time, procrastinate on major assignments, and struggle with time and task management (Hillier et al., 2020). Instructors can provide support for autistic students by clearly stating their expectations in their syllabus, including a statement about behavioral expectations, building in steps to complete large assignments, reminding students about upcoming due dates, and having a consistent course structure.

Social and Communication Skills

Postsecondary institutions rely on neurotypical standards for academic and social engagement, which presents a major barrier to college success for autistic students who may struggle with interpreting verbal and nonverbal communication, making eye contact, maintaining personal space, and conforming to social norms (Brown & Coomes, 2016). In their study of faculty experiences of students with autism, Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) found that faculty perceived autistic students as having a decreased ability to recognize social cues, sarcasm, and changes in subject during a discussion. Misinterpreted social cues can lead to uncomfortable interactions with neurotypical peers, which adds stress to social situations and can increase an autistic student's fear of rejection (Brown & Coomes, 2016). In the classroom setting, this often impacts students' ability to work effectively with groups, build reciprocal relationships with peers, and communicate with faculty and staff.

Additionally, autistic students also face potential academic consequences due to these differences in behavioral expectations. Under IDEA, which directs K–12 policies, students cannot be expelled for behaviors related to their disability; however, ADA and 504C do not provide such protections for postsecondary students (Brown & Volkmar, 2016). Students with disabilities can face expulsion from the college or university for violations of the student code of conduct. For example, some autistic students may not understand the social and behavioral expectations of a new and unfamiliar environment, which can result in atypical student and faculty responses leading to disciplinary actions. To address these areas, faculty and staff can include a disability statement in their syllabus, use multiple modalities to engage students, assign students to groups, and set clear expectations

for social behaviors. Instructors should focus on clear, direct communication and avoid sarcasm and ambiguity (Brown & Coomes, 2016). Instructors can provide multiple modalities for communication such as discussion boards, emails, and social apps such as GroupMe. Instructors should encourage students to communicate clearly and directly on the discussion boards as there is potential for miscommunication in this format as well.

Mental Health

Autistic students are twice as likely to have a mental health diagnosis than their peers (Hillier et al., 2020). Additionally, 65% of autistic students meet the criteria for depression and/or anxiety disorders (Hillier et al., 2020) and have a greater risk of suicide than their non-autistic peers, which is exacerbated by a lack of appropriate screening tools (Dwyer et al., 2022). To mitigate this, improved mental health supports are needed for them at their institutions. Recommendations include allowing students a suitable number of counseling appointments with a preferred counselor who has training in working with neurodivergent clients. Autistic students have also requested counseling support groups and less formal social support groups that focus on skill-building and social experiences.

To support the growing number of autistic students, colleges and universities will need to improve the available services. Postsecondary institutions can support autistic students by making sensory-friendly spaces available on campus, creating an environment that allows students to stim or use fidgets and take breaks during class when overwhelmed. Institutions should provide training on neurodiversity and mental health for faculty, staff, and students.

Stigma

Faculty, staff, and fellow students often lack the training and education needed to understand and support autistic students (Barnhill, 2016; Dymond et al., 2017). In fact, Widman and Lopez-Reyna (2020) found that students did not disclose their disability due to "negative experiences with faculty, identity issues, desire to avoid stigma, and insufficient knowledge" (p. 3167). Faculty may see autistic students as being disruptive or difficult when the students are merely engaging in the course in neurodivergent ways. Likewise, neurotypical students may not understand an autistic student's neuroatypical social and communication skills and avoid interactions with them. As a coping mechanism, autistic students often deploy strategies such as camouflaging, masking, and compensating to hide their autistic traits to appear more neurotypical (Hull et al., 2017). These coping strategies can be harmful to autistic students and lead to increased anxiety due to a fear of others discovering their autistic traits. Hull et al. found that while camouflaging and masking can help autistic people adapt to social situations in the short-term, the long-term consequences have a negative impact on quality of life.

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Additional Barriers

Other barriers to support include the wait time for services, the complexity of obtaining services, and lack of access to diagnostic resources for students who were not diagnosed in childhood. Within the population of autistic people, research estimated that 50–60% are not formally diagnosed (Lewis, 2017). Oftentimes, to establish accommodations with the university or college, a student must present documentation of a formal diagnosis. Many students are unable to complete the diagnostic process due to cost, lack of access to specialists, fear, and inability to communicate their symptoms. Students who do not have a formal diagnosis or who do not disclose their disability may be unable to utilize the available supports or receive accommodations (Petcu et al., 2021).

Supports for Autistic Students

Although academic supports are guaranteed, only 30% of autistic students who disclosed their disability received an academic support or accommodation at 4-year universities (Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020). Of those receiving support or accommodations, 56% reported the received services to be beneficial. The generalized nature of academic supports does not meet the distinct needs of autistic students, who often require a more individualized approach to address the barriers they face (Davis et al., 2021). For example, only 36.6% of the institutions studied provided sensory accommodations for autistic students with sensory processing issues (Brown & Coomes, 2016). Autistic students have many of the same needs as other students with disabilities; however, the typical accommodations provided by A.D.A. do not meet their need for support in areas such as social and communication skills, mental health, executive functioning, and self-regulation.

In 2016, thirty-one postsecondary programs offered targeted supports outside of academic accommodations for autistic students (Barnhill, 2016). Stark and Lindo (2022) identified ten studies of college programs that addressed executive functioning skills in autistic college students. Of the studies, eight addressed organization and time management, five addressed self-regulatory skills, and seven articles did not specify the areas of executive functioning that were addressed. In a review of 21 studies, the most frequent types of support were social skills, communication skills, life skills, emotional learning, vocational training, academic supports, and transitional support (Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020). These topics have also been identified by other researchers as areas where autistic students need increased support to promote success in postsecondary settings (Barnhill, 2016; Hillier et al., 2021; Kuder & Acardo, 2018). The research was unclear on whether the strategies and techniques encourage masking or if the programs teach autistic students to utilize their strengths to improve academic and social success.

The available social supports may not appropriately address the need for mental health supports for comorbid diagnoses of anxiety and depression (Davis et al., 2021). A 2019 study of postsecondary autistic students confirmed the need for support groups and increased mental health services (McMorris et al., 2019). Study authors suggested having a care coordinator to assist with navigating the support services system and the stress of transitioning to college. There is also a need for transition programs, support groups, and social groups (Hillier et al., 2021).

Peer mentoring is a powerful tool to build social success and a sense of belonging. Existing peer mentorship programs focus on making students college ready (i.e., focusing on transitioning to college) instead of advocating for colleges to be student ready (i.e., advocating for autistic students; Duerksen et al., 2021). Autistic students expressed the desire for there to be a greater awareness of autism on campus and to use mentoring relationships to create advocacy opportunities. Overall, nonacademic supports were identified as more important for autistic students than academic supports in postsecondary environments (Barnhill, 2016; Brown & Coomes, 2016; Davis et al., 2021; Dymond et al., 2017; Hillier et al., 2020; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Longtin, 2014; Nachman et al., 2022; Petcu et al., 2021; Stark & Lindo, 2022; Van Hees et al., 2015; Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020).

Autism-Specific Support Programs

The research presented throughout this paper demonstrates the need for additional supports for autistic college students. Colleges and universities in the U.S. are responding to the call with the creation of autism-specific support programs (ASPs). ASPs are designed to meet the nonacademic needs of degree-seeking autistic students with lower support needs at 2- and 4-year postsecondary institutions. As colleges and universities look for innovative ways to meet the needs of their autistic students, existing ASPs can provide valuable insight into the supports and interventions that may improve outcomes for autistic students.

Existing Support Programs

There are currently over 100 autism-specific support programs in the United States, and the number is increasing every year. A 2017–2018 search identified 55 ASPs at 4-year institutions (Viezel et al., 2020), whereas a 2018–2019 search found 74 ASPs at 2- and 4-year institutions in the United States (Nachman et al., 2022). Building from the work of Viezel et al. (2020) and Nachman et al. (2022), I cross checked the autism-specific programs they found and added additional programs by conducting internet searches. In total, I identified 102 programs at 2- and 4-year colleges and universities in the United States, an increase of 28 programs from Nachman et al.'s search in 2018–2019. By adding these additional programs, my findings concluded that about 3% of colleges and universities had ASPs, a slight increase from the 2.2% calculated by Nachman et al.'s (2022) 2018–2019 search. The rapid increase in programs demonstrates the escalating need for more support for this growing student population.

Though the number of programs is increasing, there is a disparity within where these programs exist. Currently, there are 10 programs available at 2-year colleges with eight at public 2-year institutions and two at private 2-year institutions. At 4-year universities, 31 private universities and 61 public universities offer an ASP. There are 15 states that do not offer an ASP at 2- or 4-year postsecondary institutions. This creates an issue for many autistic students since 91% of students with disabilities attend in-state colleges or universities (Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020). For the students in the 15 states that do not offer an ASP, it is unlikely they will be able to move to a different state and attend a school with an ASP. While there is a greater number of autistic students attending community colleges, 2-year colleges have the fewest ASPs. This is likely due to funding and a low number of autistic students at individual institutions (Brown & Coomes, 2016; Nachman et al., 2022).

Financial Accessibility

Many programs are limited by a lack of funding and others require students to pay for the additional services (Barnhill, 2016; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Nachman et al., 2022; Viezel et al.,

2020). I found that there are 56 fee-based programs with costs that range from $75 to over $9000 a semester. Seventeen programs stated there are no additional fees for services, and 29 did not list whether or not there is a cost for the program. The average cost of participation in an ASP was $3,338.44 per semester, with a range from $0–$9550.00 per semester (Viezel et al., 2020). For the programs with fees, most recommended students contact the vocational rehabilitation program within their state for funding assistance. Other programs stated the services may be covered through financial aid while very few programs offered scholarships or scholarship information.

ASPs provide a plethora of services. Those with the highest fees offered more intensive services than ones with mid-range fees ($3000–$5000 per semester). Viezel et al. (2020) did not find a significant correlation between the cost of the program and the services offered. The main areas addressed by the programs included executive functioning skills, social skills, communication, career readiness, counseling, and academic skills. In general, participants received weekly support through peer mentoring, academic coaches, one-to-one meetings, and group meetings. Most programs offered social support through group events such as sharing meals at a set time, game nights, community outings, and campus involvement. Fifty programs offer transition support to assist with the transition to college and from college to career. Twenty-three do not offer a transition program within their program and 29 had no information about transition services listed.

The need for autism-specific programs is increasing rapidly, but there are barriers to access, including the cost, location, and knowledge of the programs.

Additional ASP Characteristics

The available programs also had wide-ranging results in the areas of parental involvement, where the program is housed, and on-campus partnerships. Forty-four programs do not offer options for parental involvement, and 30 programs do not mention parent involvement or support. Of the 28 programs that do mention parent involvement, the level of interaction ranged from a website with resources to regularly scheduled parent support groups. Other supports included an orientation for parents, regular updates from program coordinators, and end-of-year reviews. Some programs offered limited communication under FERPA and communicated with parents only with written permission from the student and/or with the student present. Other programs cited the need for increased autonomy and stated they would encourage students to communicate with their families but would not communicate directly with the family and that the role of family in supporting autistic students should be informed by the student.

The ASPs are housed under many different departments. For example, ASPs are housed in disability or accessibility services, departments of health and human professions, education, speech, language and hearing, as well as student affairs and centers for autism research. Fifty-six programs listed their on-campus partnerships on their website. Programs frequently partnered with residential life, accessibility or disability services, the career center, academic support services, admissions, and academic departments. On-campus partnerships and where the programs are housed are likely to influence what services are offered and how the services are implemented, as well as what lens the staff view their students through. For example, an ASP housed in a department of health and human professions may see autistic students through a medical model lens, which can affect the way they engage with students enrolled in their ASP.

In a review of the websites of the current 102 programs, only five listed the outcomes for participants in their program. Westminster College, a private 2-year college in Fulton, Missouri, reported a 73% retention and graduation rate with 26 students graduating between 2011 and 2021 (Westminister College, n.d.). At St. Joseph's University, 86% of Aspire graduates found a job or enrolled in a graduate program within 6 months (Kinney Center for Autism Education and Support, n.d.). They have an 82% success rate compared to the national average of 70%. Students in their ASP are four times more likely to find employment within 6 months of graduation than other autistic adults. Adelphi University boasted a 96% retention rate for 2019–2020, and participants had a GPA of 3.25 or higher (Bridges to Adelphi, n.d.). At Pace University, program participants had a GPA of 3.0 or higher (Pace University, n.d.), and at the University of Idaho, participants had retention and graduation rates of 81.25% (Center for Disability Access and Resources, n.d.). These programs demonstrate improved outcomes for participants; however, additional research is needed to see the impact of programs in the United States.

The need for autism-specific programs is increasing rapidly, but there are barriers to access, including the cost, location, and knowledge of the

programs. For additional information, students, parents, and faculty can find a database of current programs at: https://collegeautismspectrum.com/collegeprograms/.

Recommendations for Programs

As colleges and universities strive to create a space for autistic students, there are a number of recommendations for improving current services and creating new ones. Many of the recommendations include offering a variety of interventions that can be customized for each student, building necessary skills in high school, and educating faculty and staff about autism.

Individualized Accommodations

One of the issues autistic students may face is accessing available support programs within an institution. To streamline the process, programs can offer a care coordinator for autistic students (Cox et al., 2022; McMorris et al., 2019). The care coordinator would provide a single point of contact to assist students with managing needed services such as establishing accommodations through disability services, obtaining mental health services through the counseling center, and communicating with faculty. To build inclusive environments for autistic students, colleges and universities should offer sensory-friendly spaces such as a specific hall in the dorm and quiet areas in academic buildings (Dymond et al., 2017). Task-oriented support groups can help autistic students learn new skills and strategies to cope with the stress of college. Creating individualized supports should include the voices, needs, and recommendations of the autistic students that the institution plans to serve. Interventions should be strengths-based with a focus on existing in neurotypical spaces instead of camouflaging or masking to present as neurotypical.

Transitional Programs

Transition programs that assist students from high school to college and from college to the workforce are essential to improving outcomes for autistic students (Brown & Coomes, 2016; Cox et al., 2022). The road to college should start well before high school graduation. High schools should address executive functioning skills, self-advocacy, and social skills as early as possible (Dymond et al., 2017; Stark & Lindo, 2022; Viezel et al., 2020). Parents and the students should be involved in the planning process, and students should be explicitly taught how to identify and advocate for their educational needs. Summer bridge programs can play an essential role in lowering stress and improving academic outcomes for autistic students. High school to college transition programs give autistic students opportunities to acclimate to the college environment before the stress of coursework is added.

Autistic students face high unemployment rates, with only 37.2% of autistic young adults employed 8 years after graduating high school (Briel & Getzel, 2014; Lee & Carter, 2012). To confront the barriers to employment, autistic students often require explicit training and education on employment skills and expectations. Workshops on interviewing, social skills, managing stress, and problem solving were listed as topics needed by autistic study participants (Briel & Getzel, 2014). Students with higher levels of education are more likely to be employed; however, only 68% of the programs offered vocational support for career transitions (Viezel et al., 2020; Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020). Autistic students also benefit from internships and work experiences prior to graduating (Cox et al., 2022).

Training and Education

An emphasis on training and education for students, faculty, and staff appeared frequently in the literature (Barnhill, 2016; Brown & Coomes, 2016; Davis et al., 2021; Dymond et al., 2017; Hillier et al., 2020; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Longtin, 2014; Nachman et al., 2022; Petcu et al., 2021; Stark & Lindo, 2022; Van Hees et al., 2015; Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020). Many autistic students cited stigma and misunderstandings about autism as a barrier to college success (Dymond et al., 2017). Providing online training for faculty, staff, and neurotypical students can raise awareness of autism and how to support autistic students and peers (Hillier et al., 2020).

A powerful tool in supporting autistic students and all students with disabilities is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL promotes the use of multiple modalities to decrease barriers to access for all students. Along with UDL, faculty, staff, and students should use clear, direct communication with autistic students and avoid sarcasm, innuendos, and ambiguous language (Brown & Coomes, 2016). Faculty and staff can help autistic students navigate social interactions by preselecting groups for projects and facilitating group discussions. Most importantly though, faculty and staff should embrace and celebrate neurodiversity.

Additionally, autistic students benefit from explicit trainings on the implicit rules, hidden curriculum, and expectations of school and work environments. Research has shown autistic students are more successful when they receive training, education, and support in areas such as social and communication skills, life skills, employment skills, and executive functioning (Briel & Getzel, 2014; Dwyer et al., 2022; Dymond et al., 2017; Nachman et al., 2022).

Future Research

Future research focusing on postsecondary autistic students should address outcome measures for academic and nonacademic interventions and helping support services identify students who might benefit from interventions (Kuder & Accardo, 2018). Researchers should also explore how student experiences align with available services and where gaps in support exist. When examining the programs, researchers should focus on the curriculum and training of support people such as mentors and coaches. Researchers should examine whether the curriculum teaches participants to mask their autism in order to behave in more neurotypical ways or if it teaches students coping skills and ways to adapt to neurotypical environments. Available research should be published in top-tier higher education journals to increase awareness of issues related to autistic students in postsecondary environments (Cox et al., 2020). Continued research on ASPs should include how and why programs were started, how they are funded, where they are housed, how many students they serve, and participant outcomes. Research on autistic students should focus on the perspectives and experiences of the students to give voice to their needs and experiences.

Conclusion

The number of autistic students arriving on college campuses is increasing every year, but many are not persisting and leave before earning a degree. Academic supports and accommodations are not enough to meet the unique needs of this population. The ADA and 504C do not provide for these types of accommodations; therefore, it is up to colleges and universities to address the barriers autistic students may face by creating programs that provide nonacademic supports. All programs should include the voices, ideas, and feedback of autistic students and focus on helping students transition to college life by utilizing their strengths instead of teaching students to mask their autistic traits.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

About the Author

Lori Wischnewsky *is a neurodivergent doctoral research and teaching assistant at Texas State University in the Developmental Education Graduate Program. Her research focuses on neurodiversity in postsecondary settings, autism-specific support in higher education, and universal design for learning. Lori has worked with neurodivergent people in different capacities since 2001. As a recreation therapist, Lori worked with autistic young adults to build executive functioning, social, communication, and life skills. Seeing the systemic barriers her clients faced during their transition to postsecondary education inspired Lori to pursue a doctorate in developmental education. Lori received her bachelor's degree in social work from The University of Texas at Austin and her master's degree in therapeutic recreation from Texas State University.*

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