



Residential Students on the Autism Spectrum: Belonging and Inclusion

Authors



DAYNA WEINTRAUB

Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Assessment, Strategy, and Planning
Associate Member of the Faculty, Graduate School of Education
Rutgers–New Brunswick
dayna.weintraub@rutgers.edu



JUSTIN W. KELLEY

Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students
Pratt Institute
jkelle30@pratt.edu



JOAN N. COLLIER

Assistant Vice President for University Equity and Inclusion
Associate Member of the Faculty, Graduate School of Education
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
jc2486@echo.rutgers.edu



AMY N. MIELE

Associate Dean of Students and Director of Student Affairs
Title IX and Compliance
Rutgers–New Brunswick
a1905@echo.rutgers.edu



FLORENCE A. HAMRICK

Professor Emeritus,
Graduate School of Education
Rutgers–New Brunswick
florence.hamrick@gse.rutgers.edu

THE EXPERIENCE OF BELONGING AND INCLUSION is critical for all college and university students, and for those on the autism spectrum it may be even more so. This phenomenological study explored the specific experiences of undergraduate residential students who identified as having Autism Spectrum Disorder. Findings can lead to a greater understanding of these residents and can help residence life professionals identify and develop strategies to maximize the potential of inclusive residential communities to provide them with a sense of belonging. Implications for practice include improving residential programming, creating campus collaborations, revisiting and revising expectations for resident assistant selection and training, and recommending opportunities in residential leadership, such as RA or Residence Hall Association membership, for residents on the autism spectrum.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: This research was funded in part by the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I) and the ACUHO-I Foundation to improve our understanding of the housing and residence life profession.

Living in residence halls provides students with opportunities to foster their self-awareness and individual development and to live cooperatively with others (Shushok et al., 2013). Residential living has many wide-ranging benefits, including increased campus engagement (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), higher persistence to degree (Schudde, 2011), and greater understanding of pluralism in terms of race and ethnicity (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Creating inclusive residential student communities is critical to fostering a sense of belonging for all students (Samura, 2016). Supporting those with disabilities is an ongoing, multifaceted endeavor that entails designing, retrofitting, or renovating facilities with attention to mobility, access, and strategic use of space; equitable opportunities for engagement and leadership; and implementation of universal design principles (Brown & Broido, 2020). Increasingly, students whose disabilities do not limit their physical mobility compose the largest share of college and university students with disabilities (Lee, 2014), and the experiences of those with invisible disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are providing a growing base for research (Kimball et al., 2016; Wolf & Thierfeld Brown, 2014).

The purpose of this study was to explore experiences of belonging and inclusion among residential students with autism¹ at one large public university with a large residential program encompassing a variety of facilities and living arrangements. The findings of this study can assist residence life professionals in maximizing the benefits of campus living for all residents.

¹ We use the terms “students with autism” and “autistic students” interchangeably. Although use of person-first language is typically preferred among education researchers, most participants in this study, along with many disability scholars, used, and often preferred, the latter term.

Creating inclusive residential student communities is critical to fostering a sense of belonging for all students.

CONTEXTUALIZING STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines define autism spectrum disorder as entailing “deficits in social-emotional reciprocity; deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors; and deficits in developing, understanding, maintaining relationships . . . repetitive speech or motor movements; insistence on sameness, restricted interests, or unusual response to sensory input” (Baio et al., 2018, para. 7).² The number of formal ASD diagnoses continues to rise in the United States. About one in 59 children were diagnosed with ASD in 2014, compared to one in 125 in 2004 (CDC, 2024, para. 3)

Centering clinical diagnoses of disability or individual-level sets of criteria or indicators of disability does not provide an appropriate framework for studying campus environments, policies, and practices as experienced by students. However, recent research emphasizes social constructionist models (Evans et al., 2017; Kimball et al., 2016) that position disabilities such as ASD as flexible social identities or sets of embodied experiences that are nonetheless, within the prevailing contexts of neurotypicality, subject to being stigmatized or marginalized as deficiencies, tacitly reinforcing the initial CDC definitions above. Residence life offers many opportunities to identify and address disabling barriers for students with autism. There may be procedural barriers in student codes of conduct, especially within provisions that reflect the tacit yet unarticulated social norms and expectations of students. Behavioral manifestations of autism such as unwelcome contact that transgress neurotypically centered social norms or codes of conduct (DiMaria, 2018) can result in formal conduct or Title IX violation charges, thus magnifying the social isolation or community marginalization that many autistic students experience. In a larger sense, these barriers hinder community participation, educational opportunities, and students’ sense of belonging and inclusion.

Being on the autism spectrum is not inconsistent with academic achievement and success. Forty-four percent of eight-year-olds in CDC’s ASD networking and monitoring sites posted IQ scores in the average to above average range (Baio et al., 2018), and neurodiverse applicants (including autistic students) meet the same threshold qualifications for admission as those for all students (Kimball et al., 2016). Yet in one early study, students with disabilities had lower rates of degree completion than students without disabilities despite having the same academic qualifications upon matriculation (Belch, 2004).

Many colleges and universities are creating or expanding programs or initiatives to provide support, advocacy, structures, and mentoring for students with autism that can lead to their successful retention and graduation. Higher education institutions

² We do not condone the use of deficit language when discussing neurodiversity, but the clinical definition is, unfortunately, written as such.

have also become more sensitized to the lack of career-related internships or work opportunities for autistic students.

Case management models are increasingly replacing episodic or ad hoc approaches to serving students and providing ongoing support; residence life units frequently employ specialists who are trained in accommodating residents with a variety of medical, mobility, or emotional conditions and who work collaboratively with disability service offices. These trends are consistent with Bauman and colleagues' (2013) recommendations that housing and residence life professionals maintain close relationships with campus partners, advocate for students with disabilities, and adopt collaborative approaches in order to foster students' belonging and inclusion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, DESIGN, AND METHODS

This phenomenological (Crotty, 1998) study was exploratory in nature and sought to examine the experiences of residential college students with autism. Using a social constructionism theoretical perspective (Vygotsky, 1978) enabled researchers to understand how participants made sense of their experiences in relationship to their identities as campus residents with autism. Researchers collected data via participant-authored journals and semi-structured interviews. The research site was a large public research-intensive university in the northeastern United States that is nationally known both for the compositional diversity of its student body and for having one of the largest campus housing programs.

Research team members all identify as neurotypical, and a graduate student with autism was hired on an hourly basis to provide consultation on the study's design and methods.

Participants' Recruitment and Overview

The criteria for participants included being a student at the institution (1) who identified as being on the autism spectrum and (2) who lived on campus at the time of the study or had earlier lived in on-campus housing. A formal ASD diagnosis was not a selection criterion. This was a deliberate decision made to avoid excluding potential participants who had not sought or possibly could not afford formal testing. Stigma surrounding autism may have hindered participation by otherwise qualified students, particularly those experiencing more day-to-day concerns or academic difficulties. Participants received a \$50 cash incentive for participating in the study.

Participants were recruited from December 2018 to March 2019 via advertisements posted on the Office of Residence Life's Facebook and Instagram pages. Key colleagues representing residence life (such as accommodation request reviewers), disability services, and a campus-wide standalone program for students on the autism

When asked about positive aspects of their autism, most participants appreciated their heightened abilities to focus on academics and homework, given conducive environments and routines.

spectrum forwarded the study invitation to prospective respondents, 11 of whom completed the data collection process and lived in campus housing during data collection. See Table 1 for detailed participant demographics.

TABLE 1**Participant Demographics**

Pseudonym & pronouns	Gender identification	Race/ ethnicity	Sexual orientation	Major(s)/ minor(s)	Class year	Years in campus housing
Alex They, their	Man	White	Straight	Political Science	Senior	4
Becca She, her	Woman	White	Straight	Pharmacy	First-year	1
Carl* He, him	Man	White	Gay	Undeclared/ Electrical & Computer Engineering	First-year	1
Cass** They, them	Non-binary	White	Bisexual	Exercise Science	Junior	2.5
Cloud** He, him	Man	White	Straight	Geography, Labor Studies, & Employment Relations	Senior	4.5
Grace She, her	Woman	White	Bisexual	Psychology	First-year	1
Jay He, him	Man	White	Straight	Journalism	Senior	4
Jonie** She, her	Woman	White	(no answer)	Social Work	Junior	1
Lucy She, her	Woman	White	Bisexual	Packaging Engineering	Junior	3
Tony** He, him	Man	White	Gay	Painting and Graphic Design, minor in Psychology	Sophomore	1
Yaquob He, him	Man	Multi racial	(no answer)	Mechanical Engineering	First-year	1

* Carl is an international student; all others are domestic.

** Cass, Cloud, Jonie, and Tony started college elsewhere and then transferred to the university.

All the participants identified as autistic, referring to themselves as “being autistic,” being “on the spectrum,” or having “Asperger’s.” Eight participants had received clinical diagnoses of ASD as toddlers or young children. Jonie and Lucy had decided not to seek a diagnosis out of concerns relating to stigma and future employability. As Lucy explained, “Understanding [of ASD] has increased, but in the professional world, it’s still an overall negative trait.” Cass, who had initially resisted looking into ASD, sought clinical consultations.

Several participants discussed how they defined and experienced autism. For example, Yaquob said, “There’s a quote that I like: ‘Autism doesn’t define the person. The person defines autism.’ I wouldn’t view it as a disability, I would just view it as a different mindset.” Tony noted his “slower processing speed” and described how his thoughts overwhelm his mind and how the noise in his head is louder than everything outside. Lucy defined autism as a state of being or “the way your brain is structured. There’s really no point where my autism ends and I start, or the other way around.” She added, “Accepting autism in yourself is like accepting you for who you are.”

Data Collection and Analyses

Two research team members collected all data and served as principal correspondents with participants. During an initial meeting with each one, researchers explained the study, obtained informed consent, answered questions, and distributed the journal topics and prompts. Journaling allowed participants to reflect on their campus experiences, sources for disclosure and support, and perceptions of the university’s espoused commitments to diversity and inclusion. They completed journals prior to their individual semi-structured interview, which incorporated follow-up questions based on the journal information, to varying degrees. The semi-structured interview focused on residence hall experiences; belonging and inclusion as conveyed by people, programs, and spaces; self-advocacy and activism; and suggestions for improving residential experiences.

Once data were organized for review, three research team members created a codebook together. Analyses included rounds of open and focused coding (Jones et al., 2013) leading to thematic findings with supporting evidence. The coding yielded broad themes about three areas: physical space, engagement in programming, and self-determination. In order to increase accuracy and validity, participants were invited to member-check (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985); while data collection occurred prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the data analysis was impacted by COVID mitigation protocols that prioritized safety, causing the forgoing of member-checking and a delay in transcript analysis.

As a group, participants were all academically successful, which helps advance a more nuanced understanding of autism as a spectrum, with autistic college students being much more likely to function socially and academically at comparatively high levels.

FINDINGS

The three themes of physical space, programmatic engagement, and self-determination reveal valuable insights into students' experiences and perceptions of belonging, inclusion, isolation, and exclusion within residential and campus settings.

Physical Space: Residence Halls as Relief and Ruckus

Most participants identified their rooms as the most comfortable space for them; for example, Jay enjoyed "relaxing, watching videos, getting work done" in his room, but environmental features like lighting and noise detracted from this comfort. Bright artificial lighting in their rooms made it difficult for some of them to concentrate, and high noise levels related to music, running, or shouting, which occurred even during posted quiet hours, were distracting. Fire drills and fire alarms were particularly disruptive. Alex described the "loud and unbearable" alarm and the subsequent building evacuations that left them "disoriented" and required considerable time and space for them to become calm again. Fortunately, participants found spaces on campus with features that were more conducive to their comfort and concentration, such as a student center room "with mellow lighting and natural light." Lucy preferred to study in the libraries, noting that "studying amidst a group of people encourages me to focus, as long as it's quiet." Jay found some residence hall lounges that tended to be quieter, but he also went to familiar, comfortable spaces on campus, "places I go to every day or every week," if needed.

While participants were generally satisfied with their roommates, and three of them lived in singles (Becca, Yaquob, and Cloud), some noted concerns about sharing a room or bathrooms and preferred more privacy. For example, Lucy advocated for dividing curtains, and Carl, who found sharing a bathroom distressing, suggested retractable accordion walls.

Participants also worried about how their roommates might perceive their behavior. In her journal, Lucy wrote about hearing stories of "weird" roommates with odd behaviors and concluded, "I think about how that could be me being laughed about in those stories, being judged simply for being myself in my own home." She described her own roommate as a "good person" who is not "paying attention to me most of the time, but when you're already self-conscious about acting in ways that are seen as abnormal, it really does feel that way." Some participants reported serious initial or ongoing tensions. Alex and their first roommate became involved in the same campus club, both rising to executive board officers, but their relationship then deteriorated, requiring staff intervention for Alex to secure a different roommate.

Participants' opinions differed on whether they would prefer to live in a single or share a room. Cass noted a preference for "just living in a single," while Tony preferred having a roommate, noting that roommates helped him be connected and continue to develop self-awareness and social skills and concluding, "It grounds me." Carl, who found it difficult to sleep when his roommate stayed up late talking on his phone, says he is now less apprehensive about sharing living space: "It has taught me how to find compromises, day to day living with a roommate."

The findings highlight a number of beneficial strategies for residential professionals, including improving program content and structure, acknowledging self-diagnoses in the accommodations process, expanding RA training, and considering autistic sensitivities in the room assignment process.

Residential living provided a springboard to friendships for some respondents. As Becca noted, “If I weren’t living on campus, I don’t think I’d have friends here,” and “I felt for the first time in an academic setting that I belonged.” Lucy and Cass both noted the large size of the university as being conducive for finding friends, as well as, in Cass’ words, readily “blending into the background” when desired. Tony lived in an LGBTQ+ themed residence community and observed, “I’m in a lot of social circles now, because of that group.”

Most respondents said they’d feel comfortable approaching residence life staff for support, and a few had asked for assistance, mostly with enforcement of quiet hours. They appreciated when residence life educated community members about autism. Jay, for example, had been invited one year to take part in an RA training session: “I actually spoke on a panel in front of hundreds of RAs talking about my experience on the spectrum and my experiences with residence life.” He noted that such training “is an indicator of commitment to making life comfortable for people on the spectrum.”

Programmatic Involvement: Connections and Chaos

Asked about social, educational, and community-building programs in the residence halls, participants identified programs they enjoyed and felt were worthwhile. Tony described an affirming, low-key community activity during which he felt comfortable disclosing his learning disability and autism.

It was actually really cool because it opened up a discussion about learning disabilities in general. Some people told me they had ADHD, dyslexia, some people also had autism as well. It was a cool moment where I felt very included, and not awkward.

Participants favored programs that centered quieter or individual activities. Jay endorsed programs such as “movie nights, video games, programs with food, just a thing to chill.” During their first year, Cass attended a painting session in their residence hall and enjoyed it so much that they “went to a friend’s dorm to attend their painting session, too.” Lucy had similar suggestions for programs that don’t “necessitate talking to people. . . . Interaction becomes kind of a choice.” Jonie suggested virtual programming “such as live forums where students can interact with the hosts and one another in chat boxes” as a more appealing format.

While they understood the value of residential programs, some were wary of large residence hall gatherings because crowds of people, lots of noise, and loud music can trigger sensory issues. Lucy recalled reading about an upcoming residence hall event and thinking, “‘Oh, this is like an ice-breaker,’ and [I] just decided not to go.” It made her uneasy “to think of sitting in a circle with a bunch of people looking at me.”

Despite these concerns, participants appreciated the social environment of residence hall living. Grace said that living on campus gives her “a sense of security that I’m not going to bed alone. I love having other people. I love having a roommate to be with. It’s nice to know that I have so many other people in my dorm.” Several participants associated living on campus with positive outcomes. As Tony acknowledged, “If I didn’t live on campus this semester, I probably would not have done as well as I did.” Although Jonie didn’t feel “super connected,” she said, “I do feel like it’s done a good deal of things for me.”

Several participants highlighted how other students’ perception of them impacted their sense of belonging. Becca said, “As long as I feel liked, I feel like I belong. And I do feel like I’m liked here.” Cloud did not feel accepted by others and said he generally “felt like a stranger out of nowhere.” Similarly, Carl highlighted that he feels mostly “tolerance to those like me” and that people’s “numbed sensitivities” rendered him largely alone.

Self-Determination: Anxieties and Abilities

Participants discussed how their autism manifested in everyday life, particularly in the way they understood and navigated their identity. This sense of self undergirded engagement with their environments and the people in their environment. All participants mentioned social anxieties that resulted in feelings of hypervisibility and fears of making mistakes and drawing unwanted attention. Most were familiar with stereotypical manifestations and characteristics of ASD (such as being easily distracted by sound or movement, not understanding figurative language, and lacking eye contact), which added to their social unease. When Jay felt uncomfortable about some of the behaviors he observed in people on the spectrum, he wondered if he makes others feel uncomfortable. Others discussed talking or muttering to themselves, which Cloud equated with “thinking out loud,” even though it can attract unwanted attention. Cass identified such attention as exacerbating, and not simply reflecting, their anxieties: “I want to say that my social anxiety came about not as a result of autism specifically, but as a result of how people respond to autistic traits.” Participants discussed engaging in regular decompression or “me time” to offset social anxieties.

When asked about positive aspects of their autism, most participants appreciated their heightened abilities to focus on academics and homework, given conducive environments and routines. For Lucy, listening to music evokes “mental images” that she re-creates through her own art, connections that she credited largely to autism. In addition to their autism, some participants described additional, intersecting identities (related to sexual orientation, religion, and national origin) or challenges (such as learning disabilities) that factored into their decisions about disclosing their autism to others. For example, as Tony, who lives in an LGBTQ-themed residential community,

For autistic students, spontaneous, unscripted, and highly interactive programs intended to welcome students and foster relationships and community belonging may be more likely to alienate and isolate.

said, “When I came out [as gay], I just kind of like came out to everyone: ‘Hey, I’m gay.’ ‘Hey, I’m gay.’ ‘Hey, I’m gay.’ I was like, ‘Should I do that with Asperger’s?’ But I’m like, ‘Nah.’” Carl, an international student who speaks fluent English with a slight accent, is cautious about disclosing and wrote in his journal: “My differences in behavior due to autism might potentiate people’s fears of foreigners.”

Many participants reinforced the fact that autism varies across a spectrum and that there is an extraordinary heterogeneity among people with the disorder. Lucy, who does not have a clinical diagnosis, had hesitated to volunteer for the study because she didn’t know if she was “autistic enough to participate.” She had feared being asked to speak “for other people’s experiences. For autistic people, that’s very difficult because it’s such a wide spectrum and people’s needs are, like, individual.” Grace explained that she doesn’t necessarily “fit in” with autistic students who “are in a different part of the spectrum,” and Jonie described her issues related to autism as a “First World problem” compared to those who are “on the further end of the spectrum.”

BOUNDARIES

The study was limited to a single institutional context, which allowed researchers to focus the study on a singular context. The study’s mostly homogeneous racial composition limited the possibility of representing the perspectives of racially minoritized people with autism. In addition, other dimensions of diversity were disclosed by participants but were not consistently discussed in relationship to experiences with autism; therefore, the study’s focus is mostly limited to concrete examples of experiences in which autism is the primary lens.

DISCUSSION

Stephen Shore, a member of and advocate for the autistic community, famously said, “If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.” During the course of this study, we met 11 individuals who identified as autistic. Although this study foregrounded a focus on autism, ASD, like other social identities, is not always the central or most salient consideration for individuals. One clear example is that participants’ concerns regarding things like fitting in, making friends, dealing with peer and family influences, and succeeding in college also predominate in concerns among neurotypical college students.

As a group, participants were all academically successful, which helps advance a more nuanced understanding of autism as a spectrum, with autistic college students being much more likely to function socially and academically at comparatively high levels. This observation is not intended to negate the responsibilities of campus offices to broaden access, support, and acceptance for autistic students. The challenges associated with the sensory environment that disrupted participants’ focus, self-management, routine, and organization have been documented in prior literature and include lighting sources, social anxieties, hyperawareness, crowds, and noise. What may not be apparent is that these disruptions constitute higher stakes for autistic students and interfere with self-regulation, focus, academics, and well-being.

The findings highlight the need for information and for environmental supports that are interpersonal, physical, and accessible to students. Campus living provides opportunities for residents to articulate and advocate for needs, to identify reasonable solutions and compromises, to enter into peer communities and relationships, and to connect with campus-based support resources—all of which are routinely facilitated by student and professional staff who should be educated and aware of a variety of students' needs, mindsets, and preferences.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings highlight a number of beneficial strategies for residential professionals, including improving program content and structure, acknowledging self-diagnoses in the accommodations process, expanding RA training, and considering autistic sensitivities in the room assignment process. When planning programs, assumptions about programmatic efforts should be revisited to include a variety of approaches and options that resonate with and are more likely to appeal to these residents. For autistic students, spontaneous, unscripted, and highly interactive programs intended to welcome students and foster relationships and community belonging may be more likely to alienate and isolate. A broad menu of programming and methods of delivery and choices regarding special interactions is more likely to reach a broader swath of residents. In post-COVID times, residence halls should also retain some level of virtual programming, communications, and participation opportunities.

Clinical documentation of neurological evaluations is frequently required to access academic and residential accommodations, but the criteria for diagnosis continue to evolve in order to eliminate discriminatory patterns that have been reported in ASD diagnoses (Lewis, 2017). These circumstances provide opportunities for residence life staff—including but not limited to disability accommodation specialists—to foster support systems and involvement opportunities for autistic students in collaboration with colleagues in other campus offices such as student health, counseling services, and student activities.

With respect to the training and ongoing development of RAs and professional staff, an expanded understanding of diversity that invites and encourages students with autism and other so-called hidden disabilities to participate in these educational programs will foster a more inclusive community. RA opportunities can be broadly publicized by creating an informational tool, such as a social media post, flier, or brochure, that can be accessed by all prospective applicants to receive information about the position, the selection process, and potential contacts. The goal is to maximize autistic students' access to leadership roles such as membership in the Residence Hall Association and to peers and relevant advisors who can serve as personal contacts.

Accommodating all autistic residents in single rooms is unrealistic and not necessarily something they prefer. Efforts to place them in rooms away from staircases, elevators, kitchens, or social lounges can help address noise sensitivities. As codes permit, allowing fluorescent room lights to be disconnected and replaced by alternative

Autistic students would benefit from having designated low sensory quiet rooms in residence halls and other campus buildings where they can recharge or even relocate to temporarily when needed.

lighting sources will mitigate sensitivities. Autistic students would benefit from having designated low sensory quiet rooms in residence halls and other campus buildings where they can recharge or even relocate to temporarily when needed. Additional recommendations include soundproofing throughout buildings and providing advance notice of fire drills. In lieu of fire drills, security or building staff can give regular tours of emergency exits and routes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

We found ample evidence of the importance of environmental perceptions and interactions in the participants' experiences. Further studies utilizing ecological and environmental frameworks will aid in primary examinations and assessments of students' multifaceted environments rather than reflecting a principal focus on changing autistic students, which is an inherent part of deficit models.

Researchers should continue to highlight studies on the voices and perspectives of autistic students themselves. For example, research on autistic students of color can explore an invaluable range of complexities in identity and experiences. In addition, varieties of data collection methods should be utilized, offering choices and options for participants' interactions with researchers and for contributing perspectives and experiences. Journaling or visual methods such as photographs can complement the data obtained from interviews, especially with respondents who are less comfortable with unstructured or semi-structured social interactions. Future research may also benefit from employing an iterative and nonlinear recruitment, data collection, and analysis process. Echoing a disability rights mantra, "Nothing about us without us," participatory action research designs may yield fruitful and impactful studies, as could accompanying participants to residence halls, classrooms, lounges, and other spaces chosen by them as part of an environmental and conversational walking tour.

CONCLUSION

With greater numbers of students on the autism spectrum enrolling in higher education institutions, administrators must design intentional strategies for welcoming neurodivergent students to campus. This study strove to better understand how residential students on the autism spectrum experience belonging and inclusion. Findings from this study provide residential life professionals with insights on how physical space and the programmatic elements of living on campus impact these students' experiences of belonging, inclusion, or exclusion. The researchers hope that the lessons learned from these participants will empower college and university administrators to make intentional efforts in creating an environment of inclusion for all neurodiverse learners. ■

REFERENCES

- Baio, J., Wiggins, L., Christensen, D. L., Maenner, M. J., Daniels, J., Warren, Z., Kurzius-Spencer, M., Zahorodny, W., Rosenberg, C. R., White, T., Durkin, M. S., Imm, P., Nikolaou, L., Yeargin-Allsopp, M., Lee, L.-C., Harrington, R., Lopez, M., Fitzgerald, R. T., Hewitt, A., Pettygrove, S., . . . Dowling, N. (2018, April 27). Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder among children aged 8 years—Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 sites, United States, 2014. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 67(6), 1–23. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29701730/>
- Bauman, M., Davidson, D., Sachs, M., & Kotarski, T. (2013). Service, comfort, or emotional support? The evolution of disability law and campus housing. *The Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 39(2), 142–156.
- Belch, H. (2004). Retention and students with disabilities. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice*, 6(1), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.2190/MC5A-DHRV-1GHM-N0CD>
- Brown, K. R., & Broido, E. M. (2020). Engaging students with disabilities. In S. J. Quayle, S. R. Harper, & S. L. Pendakur (Eds.), *Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations* (3rd ed., pp. 237–255). Routledge.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2024, January 25). *Data and statistics on Autism Spectrum Disorder*. https://www.cdc.gov/autism/data-research/?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Sage.
- DiMaria, J. T. (2018). Disability and student conduct systems. In J. Hudson, A. Acosta, & R. C. Holmes (Eds.), *Conduct and community: A residence life practitioner's guide* (pp. 308–312). Association of College and University Housing Officers-International.
- Evans, S. D., Duckett, P., Lawthorn, R., & Kivell, N. (2017). Positioning the critical in community psychology. In M. A. Bond, I. Serrano-Garcia, & C. Keys, (Eds.), *APA handbook of community psychology: Theoretical foundations, core concepts, and emerging challenges* (pp. 107–127). American Psychological Association.
- Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2013). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education: Fundamental elements and issues* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Kimball, E. W., Wells, R. S., Ostiguy, B. J., Manly, C. A., & Lauterbach, A. A. (2016). Students with disabilities in higher education: A review of the literature and an agenda for future research. In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 91–156). Springer.
- Lee, B. A. (2014). Students with disabilities: Opportunities and challenges for colleges and universities. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 46(1), 40–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2014.867212>
- Lewis, L. F. (2017). A mixed methods study of barriers to formal diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder in adults. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47, 2410–2424. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3168-3>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

- Mayhew, M. J., Rockenbach, A. B., Bowman, N. A., Seifert, T. A., & Wolniak, G. C. (2016). *How college affects students: 21st century evidence that higher education works*. Jossey-Bass.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students. Volume 2: A third decade of research*. Jossey-Bass.
- Samura, M. (2016). How can residence hall spaces facilitate student belonging? Examining students' experiences to inform campus planning and programs. *Planning for Higher Education*, 44(4), 90–101.
- Schudde, L. T. (2011). The causal effects of campus residency on college student retention. *Review of Higher Education*, 34(4), 581–610. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2011.0023>
- Shushok, F., Penven, J., Stephens, R., & Keith, C. (2013). The past, present, and future of residential colleges: Looking back at S. Stewart Gordon's "Living and Learning in College." *The Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 39(2), 114–126.
- Wolf, L. E., & Thierfeld Brown, J. (2014). Fostering success for students with hidden disabilities. In M. L. Vance, N. E. Lipsitz, & K. Parks (Eds.), *Beyond the Americans with Disabilities Act: Inclusive policy and practice for higher education* (pp. 111–123). NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Harvard University Press.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the challenges facing students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in higher education? How do spaces on campus, events, and self-determination influence autistic student experiences?
2. How do your institution and department currently support students on the autism spectrum? What recommendations from the text could you suggest to leadership or implement within your department?
3. What new trainings might you develop for professional staff, resident assistants, peer mentors, and facility staff about ASD? What do you believe is the most important information to share?
4. Some of the student participants identified as autistic but did not have a formal diagnosis due to “concerns relating to stigma and future employability.” What can your department do to support students who disclose having autism but do not have a diagnosis and are not registered with disability services? What can your department do to reduce the stigma surrounding ASD?

Discussion questions developed by Derin Murphy, Virginia Tech