Bolstering Autistic College Students’ Mental Health and Wellness

Brett Ranon Nachman, Ph.D.
NC State University
This project is supported by the health resources and services administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of health and human services (HHS) under the autism intervention research network on physical health (AIR-P) grant, UT2MC39440. The information, content and/or conclusions are those of the authors and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.
Who’s here today?

In the chat box, please indicate **where** you are currently joining in from and **how** you are connected to the autism community (e.g., Raleigh, NC; autistic researcher)

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
Outline

1. Personal & Professional Journey
2. Existent Research
3. Dissertation Work
4. Practical Implications
5. Q&A

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
Community College Years

- Forged great connections with faculty
- Took on leadership roles, sometimes w/o preparation
- Questioned my career directions as a journalist
- Kept autism identity private... until a “defining moment”
THE PATH TO TRANSFER: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

- Adopting new roles and responsibilities (e.g., student orgs, volunteering)
- Facing new frustrations as a student leader
- Changing my career pathway entirely

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
FOLLOWING A NEW PATH IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

- Moving across the country and living solo
- Heading straight into my doctoral studies
- Incorporating my autistic identity into my research work
- Starting new endeavors from scratch

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Twitter: @bnachmanreports
Research Becomes “Me-search”

- Community college students and transfer
- Autism in higher education
- LGBTQ+ campus climate

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
THE JOURNEY CONTINUES...

• Obtained doctorate from UW-Madison
• Engaging in postdoc at NC State
• Starting faculty career next fall at the University of Arkansas!

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Twitter: @bnachmanreports
EXISTENT RESEARCH: CONCERNING TRENDS

Strong co-occurrence with anxiety and depression (e.g., Accardo et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2018; McMorris et al., 2019)

Unpredictable aspects of college can exacerbate stressors (e.g., LeGary, 2017; Van Hees et al., 2015; White et al, 2016)

Loneliness impacts college students broadly, yes, though can be heightened for autistic individuals (Gurbuz et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2018; Vincent et al., 2017)

Fears associated with disclosure of autism identity are prevalent, leading to selective disclosure (e.g., Cox et al., 2017; Gelbar et al., 2015)
EXISTENT RESEARCH: WHAT WORKS

Reduce classroom stressors through implementing alternative assignments and providing extensions (Cai & Richdale, 2016; Knott & Taylor, 2014)

Employ psychoeducation courses that help students manage anxiety (Lei et al., 2020)

Enable students to focus on their strengths in coursework (e.g., Casement, 2019; Lei et al, 2020)

Engage students in coping mechanisms that provide distractions when anxious (Cai & Richdale, 2016)
Research Question

How do autistic community college students enrolled in a college-based autism transition program navigate higher education?

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Twitter: @bnachmanreports
LITERATURE LIMITATIONS AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

- Difficulty in accessing student samples/small sample size
- Low response rates
- Participant bias (e.g., self-favorability bias)
- Problematic measures
- Absence of measures
- Lack of autistic agency
- Exclusion of comm. colleges (and lack of disaggregation)
- Deficit framing
- Absence of theory

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Twitter: @bnachmanreports
Epistemological perspectives

(SOCIAL) CONSTRUCTIVISM

Researcher/participants co-create knowledge
Multiple realities exist

Sources: Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Jones, 1996; Merriam, 1998;
Case studies

• Focus on the why and how of a phenomenon (Yin, 1981)

• Often examine singular, closed units of analysis w/ rich detail (Creswell, 2013)

• My study: single-case embedded design w/ multiple units of analysis

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
STUDY SITE

Blue Moon Community College (BMCC)
- Western United States
- Serves highest number of transfer students in the state
- Considered a baccalaureate/associate’s college (Carnegie)

Captains of Autism in Community College (CACC)
- Nearly a decade old
- Serves approximately 140 autistic students
- Features workshops, courses, peer mentors

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
## PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CACC Staff</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMCC Staff</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People Students</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominated Students</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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## Student Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Autism Identity</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Other Disabilities (in Students’ Words)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Asperger’s</td>
<td>Straight/Heterosexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Dysgraphia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Asperger’s</td>
<td>Straight/Heterosexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Asperger’s</td>
<td>Straight/Heterosexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>ADHD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edweena</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Autistic</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Trans* Female</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finn</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Autistic</td>
<td>Straight/Heterosexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Deaf/Hard of Hearing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Asian; White</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Autistic</td>
<td>Straight/Heterosexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Anxiety; Visual Impairment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Asperger’s</td>
<td>Straight/Heterosexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Anxiety; ADD; Depression; OCD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Autistic</td>
<td>Straight/Heterosexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Heart Block</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Asian; White</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Asperger’s</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Anxiety; ADD; Depression; OCD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Autism Spectrum</td>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sara Lyall</td>
<td>Black/African American; White</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Autism Spectrum</td>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>Genderqueer/Gender Nonconforming</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Autistic; Asperger’s</td>
<td>Straight/Heterosexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>ADD; Depression; “Maybe Anxiety”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thrawn</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latinx; White</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Autistic</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>Anxiety; Depression; Developmental Coordination Disorder; Dysgraphia; Specific Learning Disorder (Mathematics)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Edweena was originally diagnosed with Asperger’s, though now considers herself autistic; Stephen indicated that he was tentatively diagnosed with autism at a young age.

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
1. Surveys

Distributed by program staff to autistic students

22 questions across three categories: identities; autism and disabilities; and educational experiences.

15/22 students indicated interest in further participation

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
2. Interviews

- 13 Students (2X for 10/13)
- 9 People Students Nominated (1X)
- 4 Program Staff (multiple times)
- 9 College Admin (1X)

52 total interviews; 34 unique participants

Participants selected location (in person or via Skype); provided questions in advance

Student interviews entailed narrative interviews
3. Written Reflections

Ward and Webster (2018) found engaging in these to allow students to illustrate additional insights.

Students were asked to complete (in a template in Word) 6 or more prompts at their convenience (between interviews).

- Personal development, health, and interests
- Academics and career
- Social experiences
4. Observations

Students selected a location/context for me to observe their interactions with others

- Meetings with peer mentors (9)
- Email exchanges (3)
- Text message exchange (1)
5. Documentation

- Internal documents
  - Foundational materials
  - Workshop/course syllabi
  - Training materials
  - Program reports

- Publicly accessible info
  - Website content (press releases, YouTube videos, misc. material)

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
Captains of Autism in Community College Context

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
(My daughter Julia) acts "pretty normal," though a "big hole in the road" may dismantle her ability to go about her day. - Anne

“If you have one gear that's irregular like myself, the person operating the machine has to take the gear and they have to put energy into making sure that it works in sync with the others,” John (student)
Academic Challenges

- Studying
- Connecting with faculty
- Navigating group work
- Missing due dates
- Lacking clarity on assignments
- Experiencing trauma within the curriculum
- Struggling in online classes
- Dropping out of classes and taking a break from college

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
General College Experiences

- Obtaining Accommodations
- Leverage Interests
- Engaging in Campus Life and Organizations
- Determining the Best College Major
- Applying for Jobs
- Weighing Parental Dependence

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
Navigating CACC

Positives
- Feeling Community, Pride & Common Understanding
- Helping Each Other
- Sharing Similar Interests
- Developing Natural Friendships
- Feeling Antisocial, Introverted
- Lacking Relatability
- Judging Peers' Autistic Traits

Negatives

Negotiating Friendship and Community

“If I expect neurotypical people to be patient with me because of my autism, what does it say if I'm not patient with other autistic people?” Charles posed.

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Handling Health and Emotions

Battling Anxiety and Depression
• Influenced by Past Trauma
• Overwhelming College Experiences
• Task Initiation Difficulties

Charles lamented how he could not always make sense of peers’ body language, which creates social anxiety. There’s not a medication that makes you magically be able to understand people’s body language.

bnachma@ncsu.edu
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Managing the Highs and Lows of Emotional Regulation

- Pervasive Frustration
- Tension with Faculty

“I don't have a short fuse as much as I have a long fuse that blows up like Mount St Helen's... it's my explosions are not fast. Generally they take a long time and then they go boom.” - George

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
Experiencing Discontent with CACC

- “Formulaic” Peer Mentors
- Disruptive Classmates
- Lack of Novelty
- “It’s All Kind of Surface Level”

Handling Health and Emotions

“What do you do when you've got somebody in the classroom who's having a meltdown about creating a LinkedIn profile because he thinks the internet is dumb?” - Charles

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
Implications

How Faculty Can Reduce Stress and Anxiety

• Assign roles to students in group work
• Offer routine with each class session
• Provide more student-driven opportunities
• Allow students to have agency in completing projects that align with their interests
• Enable solo work opportunities

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
Implications

How College Staff Can Reduce Stress and Anxiety

- Find more non-traditional avenues for students to release frustration (e.g., cycling, boxing)
- Employ collaborative problem-solving strategies
- Build alliances across various campus units
- Lead parents to interrogate their roles, work more cooperatively in maintaining boundaries

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
Implications

How Institutional Leaders Can Reduce Stress and Anxiety

- Develop smoother pathways for transitions from high school
- Create more inclusive orientation sessions (and options)
- Orient students to college environment
- Establish mentorship programs for incoming students
- Prioritize mental health discussions in first-year courses

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
Implications

How Autistic Students Can Manage Mental Health

• Express feelings to trusted supports
• Discover relaxation outlets when overwhelmed
• Find hobbies that provide distractions
• Recognize that everyone experiences stress, though it manifests differently with each person

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
Implications for Researchers and Directions for Research

• Incorporate Theory

• Reframe Wording

• Utilize Alternative Methods

• Expand Topical Reach

• Use Appropriate Instruments That Don’t Reinforce Deficit-Based Approaches Regarding Mental Health

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
Questions

bnachma@ncsu.edu
Twitter: @bnachmanreports
Contact Us: AIRP@mednet.ucla.edu

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- Subscribe to our mailing list: https://www.aucd.org/template/page.cfm?id=1209
- Website: airpnetwork.ucla.edu
Thank you for attending! A link to view the recording will be emailed to all registrants. We hope to see you next month!

Register:

**Tuesday, February 15**

4:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m. ET

AIR-P Presents – How can we use an understanding of the neurodiversity movement to develop socially valid supports for autistic people?

By Patrick Dwyer, Erin McKenney, Bella Kofner, Sergey Shevchuk-Hill, and Kristen Gillespie-Lynch