# Autistic Identity in University Students

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## Background

- Past research on neurodivergent college students has focused on students who are registered with disability services with a medical diagnosis of autism[1,2].
- However, over 1/3 of neurodivergent students never register with disability services[3] and not all neurodivergent students identify with autism or have a medical diagnosis. These students are then excluded from research and supports.
- Postsecondary education is a significant period of identity development, including autistic and neurodivergent identities[4].
- Clinical and research training advises exclusive use of person-first language, despite evidence that many disabled, autistic, and neurodivergent people prefer identity-first language[5,6].

## Aims

- Understand the diversity of disability identities among college students on the autism/neurodivergence spectrum.
- Identify students' preferences to inform language use in academic, clinical, research, and social contexts.

## Methods

- Experiences of Autistic University Students Survey
- Distributed via social media, autistic advocacy organizations, university listservs
- N = 160 autistic, neurodivergent, or disabled students
- Q12: I identify as… (Select all that apply.) disabled or person with disability, autistic or person with autism, person with Asperger's, neurodivergent, mentally ill, other, none
- Q13: I prefer… identity-first language, person-first language, no preference, I do not know the difference between identity-first and person-first language.
- Approved by UIC IRB

## Results



I identify as...
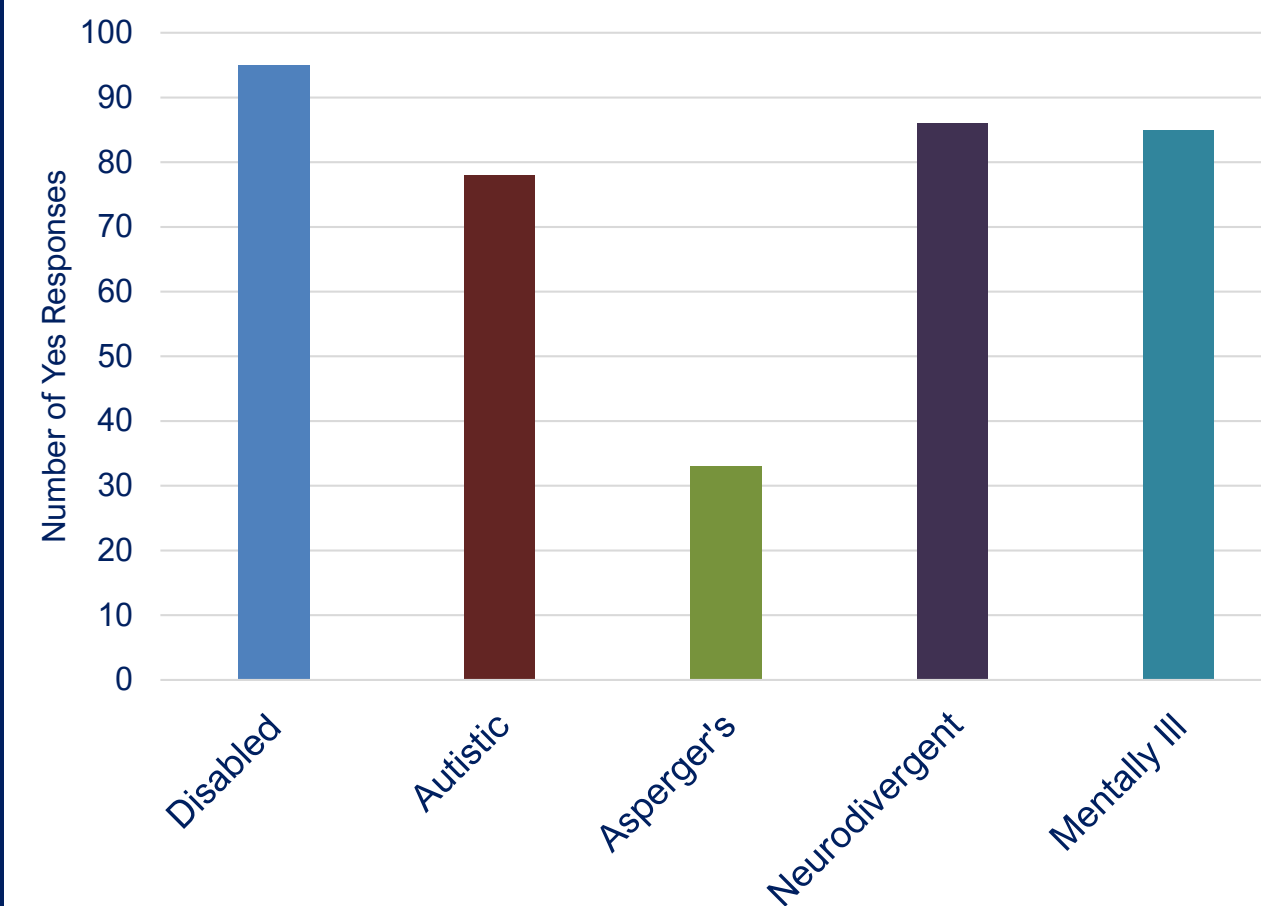
- Note: Participants were encouraged to select as many categories as they felt represented their identity and experiences.
- Participants who identified as autistic were **more likely** to identify as disabled ($X^2(1)$ = 6.129, $p$ = .013) and neurodivergent ($X^2(1)$ = 17.203, p < .001) than participants who did not identify as autistic.
- Some participants indicated that they were **multiply disabled** and that while they did identify as disabled or mentally ill, they did not do so based on their autistic identity.
- Asperger's was the **least common identity**, possibly because it was eliminated as a diagnostic category in 2013[7]. However, some individuals maintain strong Asperger's identities.
- Participants also reported identities as mad, chronically ill, temporarily disabled, multiply disabled, and person with a developmental disability.

- Among all participants, **49% preferred identity-first language** and only 9% preferred person-first language. A notable percentage of participants had no preference (21%) or did not know the difference (21%).
- Participants who identified as autistic were **more likely to prefer identity-first language** ($X^2(3)$ = 10.785, $p$ < .001) and **more likely to know the difference** between identity-first language and person-first language ($X^2(1)$= 12.919, $p$ < .001) than participants who did not identify as autistic.



Identity-First vs. Person-First Language

person-first language 9%
no preference 21%
don't know difference 21%
identity-first language 49%
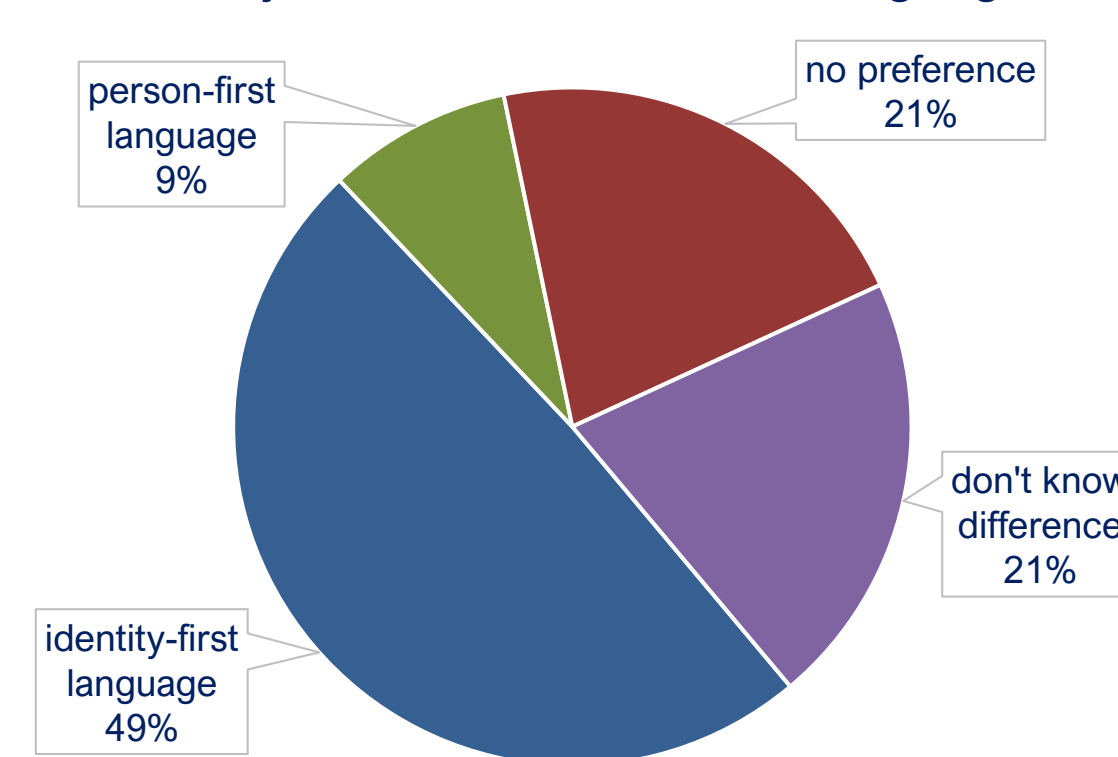
## Conclusion

- Autistic students identify with a wide range of disability identities.
- Students, especially those who identified as autistic, **overwhelmingly preferred identity-first language** over person-first language; this preference should be reflected in research, education, and student services.
- There were notable numbers of students who had no language preference or did not know the difference between identity-first and person-first language.
- Limitations: The vast majority (85%) of survey respondents identified as white. Further research is necessary to determine whether identity and language preference differs based on race, ethnicity, and cultural background.
- Future research using this dataset will identify student support and accommodations needs, compare high school and college outcomes, and explore student perspectives of their campus life and experiences.

## References

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## Acknowledgements