

# Empowering Autistic College Students: A Call-to-Action for the Increase of Specialized Support Programs in Higher Education

Marilyn Barge

School of Social Work, Tulane University

127 Elk Pl, New Orleans, LA 70112, United States

Tel: 1-504-865-5314 E-mail: [mbarge@tulane.edu](mailto:mbarge@tulane.edu), [bargemarilyn@gmail.com](mailto:bargemarilyn@gmail.com)

Kayla M. Malone (Corresponding author)

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Applied Developmental Science and Special Education Program

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Chapel Hill, NC 27599 Tel:

Tel: 1-(919) 962-2211 E-mail: [kmalone@unc.edu](mailto:kmalone@unc.edu)

Irang Kim (Corresponding author)

School of Social Work, Tulane University

127 Elk Pl, New Orleans, LA 70112, United States

Tel: 1-504-865-5314 E-mail: [ikim@tulane.edu](mailto:ikim@tulane.edu)

Received: November 25, 2024 Accepted: January 12, 2025 Published: January 20, 2025

doi:10.5296/ijsw.v12i1.22423 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijsw.v12i1.22423>

## Abstract

The rise in college enrollment of students with autism has highlighted unique academic, social, emotional, and executive functioning challenges. To address these needs, there is an urgent call for tailored support programs. Despite the demand for comprehensive support, a national shortage of autism-specific programs persists. This study, drawing upon empowerment theory, assesses the effectiveness of support systems empowering autistic students in higher education. This call-to-action paper emphasizes the necessity for federal intervention to establish training programs for college staff and academic support systems to facilitate the success of postsecondary students with autism. In addressing the keywords of higher education autism, college students with disabilities, autism support for adults, transition to adulthood, and accommodations, this paper advocates for vital changes to support this growing demographic.

**Keywords:** higher education autism, college students with disabilities, autistic adults

## 1. Introduction

College is a transformative period for many young individuals, providing opportunities for self-discovery and personal growth (Gelbar et al., 2015; McCabe, 2016). However, this experience is not equally accessible to individuals with disabilities, especially those with autism. Approximately 16,000 students with autism pursue higher education in the United States each year, yet according to the U.S. Department of Education, 34% of them are likely to drop out within 6 years, and only 38% graduate (Cox et al., 2017). The American Psychiatric Association (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) defines autism as encompassing differences in communication, social-emotional regulation, sensory processing, cognitive functioning, restrictive interests, and repetitive behaviors. These differences may lead to difficulties in executive functioning and expressive communication skills. Consequently, individuals navigating these hurdles might encounter issues with memory recall and effectively conveying thoughts or ideas to non-autistic peers and instructors, leading to lower test performance, increased stress, and anxiety (Anderson et al., 2017; Bakker et al., 2023a, 2023b; Stark & Lindo, 2022). Moreover, studies indicate that many young autistic adults, particularly those without intellectual disabilities, are more susceptible to anxiety and depression compared to their neurotypical counterparts (Gunin et al., 2021; McMorris et al., 2019).

Young autistic adults face one of the highest unemployment rates compared to other disability groups (Child Mind Institute, 2023), with an estimated 80% being unemployed. Studies indicate that two years after high school graduation, most youth with autism lack paid work, technical education, or college experience (Shattuck et al., 2012). Societal stereotypes surrounding autism exacerbate or create barriers to workplace success and higher education. Misconceptions about their abilities, communication styles, and social interactions can perpetuate discrimination, leading to exclusionary practices. To address these challenges, it is crucial to focus on dismantling such stereotypes and advocating for inclusive policies that recognize and accommodate the diverse strengths and contributions of autistic individuals (Brown et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2021;).

The objective of this paper is to advocate for the implementation of specialized support programs and provide strategies to foster a more inclusive and supportive higher education environment for autistic individuals. We discuss how universities are not currently responding to the needs of autistic students, inquire what is special about special programming, and provide examples of universities that provide these services. Lastly, we make specific recommendations for educators and practitioners in the field, higher education administrators, and policymakers.

## 2. Deficiencies in Addressing the Needs of Autistic Students in Higher Education

As more autistic students enroll in universities, there's a pressing demand for tailored support programs. Despite over 3,900 degree-granting institutions in the United States only about 60 programs specifically support autistic students (Flegenheimer & Scherf, 2022; West, 2019). These programs cover various services—from academic adjustments to social skills coaching, counseling, sensory support, and more—to foster inclusivity and understanding. While some

colleges receive funding for these initiatives under the Individual Disabilities Act, many lack dedicated programs (Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network, 2023). Consequently, disability centers often offer only basic accommodations, leaving gaps in essential support (Barnhill, 2014; von Below et al., 2021).

This deficit extends to undertrained staff and limited services, failing to meet the diverse needs of autistic students (Viezel et al., 2020). As a result, the assistance provided might not encompass the necessary mental, behavioral, and academic support for autistic students navigating higher education. Furthermore, approximately 80% of autistic young adults opt for two-year institutions, emphasizing the necessity for customized support strategies in this specific context (Roux et al., 2015). White et al. (2016) and Wei (2014) found that autistic students opt for junior colleges or two-year institutions due to various factors, including considerations like campus size and the availability of immediate support on campus, and the continuity of familiar community-based services and supports.

Categorizing and highlighting challenges faced by autistic college students underscores significant areas for attention. Notably, social interaction emerges as a pronounced concern consistently mentioned by parents of autistic individuals across different educational levels (Elias et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2018). Transitioning from these specific challenges to broader concerns, there is a substantial deficiency in comprehensive data collection and research on the experiences and outcomes of autistic students in higher education (Cox et al., 2017). This gap impedes the development of evidence-informed support strategies, emphasizing the need for a robust research agenda to better understand the specific challenges and successes of autistic students and guide the creation of more effective support systems.

Moreover, to truly address these issues and foster the academic and personal growth of autistic students, universities must adopt a multifaceted approach, encompassing specialized programs, improved mental health resources, comprehensive faculty training, and a commitment to rigorous research and data collection (Nachman, 2022). Furthermore, Morris et al. (2019) reported that around 40 to 70% of autistic students grapple with mental health issues. Autistic college students exhibit a higher prevalence of anxiety and depression in comparison to their peers. Although mental health services exist on campuses, they might not be responsive to the unique social and emotional challenges faced by autistic students (Gunin et al., 2021). These students often require individualized approaches to therapy and counseling considering their distinct communication and sensory needs (Dwyer et al., 2023). As such, there is a critical need for increased awareness and robust support mechanisms to address the mental health challenges faced by these students (Rosenau et al., 2019).

### **3. What is Special About Specialized Programming for Autistic Students?**

Specialized programs designed for autistic students within higher education institutions signify a significant stride toward fostering an inclusive educational landscape. These initiatives mark a departure from traditional approaches, instead customizing academic support to cater specifically to the diverse needs of autistic individuals. These tailored programs take into account various academic adjustments, offering extended time for exams, facilitating access to assistive technologies, and crafting learning environments that are sensitive to sensory needs

(Duerksen et al., 2021; Elias & White, 2018; Smith et al., 2012).

A comparison of graduation and employment outcomes among autistic college students, as indicated by Whittenburg et al. (2019), underscores the positive impact of specialized support services. Those who received such support demonstrated significantly higher rates of both graduation and full-time employment, in stark contrast to students without specialized assistance who experienced lower rates in both categories (Whittenburg et al., 2019). The data indicates a significant improvement in outcomes for students utilizing comprehensive support programs during their college experience (Ross & William, 2013).

In recognition of the multifaceted challenges faced by autistic students, a number of higher education institutions have taken a holistic approach. Beyond academic adjustments, they provide an array of mental health services aimed at supporting emotional well-being. These services encompass counseling, therapy, and stress management strategies tailored explicitly to assist autistic students as they navigate the complexities of college life (Rosenau et al., 2023). Certain pioneering institutions are leading the way, setting benchmarks, and encouraging others to adopt similar comprehensive approaches. Their commitment to inclusivity and tailored support highlights the possibilities for enhancing the educational experience and success of autistic students in higher education.

### *3.1 Examples of Universities Who Provide Specialized Programming*

A number of postsecondary higher educational institutions demonstrate the potential for specialized programs to empower autistic students and pave the way for their success in higher education (Autism College Network, 2023). Several colleges and universities have embraced the importance of such programs, setting examples for others to follow (College Autism Network, 2023; College Autism Spectrum, 2023).

The commitment of numerous colleges and universities to prioritize such initiatives, as evidenced by the exemplary practices emphasized by the College Autism Network (2023) and College Autism Spectrum (2023), not only demonstrates a collective recognition of inclusivity, but also establishes a foundation for fostering a supportive and enriching educational environment for autistic students. This concerted effort from universities such as Marshall University, Eastern University, Marquette University, and the University of Alabama sets a commendable precedent for other institutions, encouraging them to emulate these practices and contribute to a more accessible and diverse landscape in higher education.

Marshall University stands out as an exceptional institution housing the West Virginia Autism Training Center and the College Program for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This specialized program offers tailored coaching, social skills training, and academic support, fostering a conducive environment for autistic students. Notably, the program has upheld an impressive 97% graduation rate since 2015 and actively assists students in securing financial aid through the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. With a dedicated team of nine full-time faculty specializing in mental health training, Marshall University aims to double its current enrollment of 68 students within the next two years (B. Bragg, personal communication, October 5, 2023).

Eastern University in Pennsylvania exemplifies commitment through its College Success Program for Students with Autism (CSP), ensuring equitable access to education through specialized support like extended test-taking time and personalized coaching. Dr. Sharon Thompson, Coordinator of the CSP Program, reports an exceptional 80% graduation rate—twice the national average—and recognition by U.S. News & World Report among the top 25 colleges for autistic support (S. Thompson, personal communication, October 5, 2023). These achievements underscore Eastern University’s commitment to fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment for autistic students.

Marquette University's College of Education houses the Marquette Autism Clinic, which offers a comprehensive range of aid, from diagnostic assessments to counseling and academic assistance, championing the well-being and success of autistic students (Marquette University, n.d.). Similarly, the University of Alabama's Autism Spectrum Disorders Clinic provides comprehensive aid, encompassing diagnostic assessments and counseling services, emphasizing the holistic well-being of autistic students (University of Alabama, n.d.).

Furthermore, Table 1 provides examples of the comprehensive range of services offered by additional model university support programs for autistic students. This table also includes links embedded within the respective program titles, facilitating convenient access to additional information on each program’s website. These institutions exemplify dedication to tailored support for autistic students.

#### 4. Results

Table 1. Services Offered by Exemplary University Support Programs for Autistic Students

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Academic Assistance</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>Mental Wellness</b>	<b>Transition Support</b>
<b>Marshall University:</b> The College Program for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder	Tutoring, test accommodations	Peer mentoring	Weekly therapy	Job interview practice
<b>Eastern University:</b> The College Success Program for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder	Note-taking assistance	Community outings	Coping strategies	Life skills workshops

<b>Marquette University:</b> On Your Marq Autism Support Program	Study skills coaching	Facilitated interactions	Stress management	Individualized dorm accommodation support
<b>Drexel University:</b> Center for Autism and Neurodiversity	5 hours peer mentoring per week, workshops	Self-advocacy, inclusive approach	Social skills workshops	Inclusive and highly accessible approach
<b>Bellevue College:</b> Neurodiversity Navigators	Majority of services at no charge, credit cohort classes at cost, Autistic Presents Symposium	No extra charge for most services, some classes at cost	Counseling and emotional support, access to resources and professionals, wellness coaching	Internships, employment resources
<b>Saint Joseph's University:</b> ASPIRE Program	Tutoring, diverse learning style accommodations, specialized coursework support	Peer mentoring and community-building events, inclusive social activities, networking opportunities	Counseling and emotional support, access to resources and professionals	Guidance during key academic transitions, career planning, internships, assistance with post-graduation transitions
<b>University of West Florida:</b> ASD Early Arrival Program and Argos for Autism Program	Academic assistance tailored to the needs of students during their Fall transition	Social and community involvement opportunities	One-on-one support from academic coaches	Life skills and career preparation
<b>University of Alabama:</b> ASD Clinic and College Transition and Support program	Inclusive academic assistance	Community engagement, supportive environment	N/A	Emphasizes effective transition and multidisciplinary support
<b>Rochester Institute</b>	Academic assistance, work	Organized events fostering social	Focus on overall wellness,	Collaborates with external organizations for

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<b>of Technology:</b>	experience	connections	wellness	additional
The Spectrum		with peers	coaching	supports
Support Program				

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Moreover, Table 2 provides a list of resources that support autistic students in higher education. This table also includes links embedded within the respective program titles, facilitating convenient access to additional information on each program’s website. These resources include programs and guides, covering a range of topics, from general advice on college life to specific programs designed to meet the unique needs of autistic students. In the next section, we provide specific recommendations to educators and practitioners in the field, higher education administrators, and policymakers.

Table 2. Resources for Supporting Autistic Students in Higher Education

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Description</b>
College Autism Network	Dedicated to promoting the development of comprehensive, integrated support programs in higher education for students with autism spectrum disorders.
College Autism Spectrum	Provides resources and support for students, parents, and professionals navigating the college process with autism spectrum disorders.
Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD)	Offers resources and support for individuals with disabilities in higher education.
Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network	Disseminates research and best practices related to improving inclusive postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability (ID); helps colleges and universities develop and expand postsecondary education programs; promotes positive academic, social, independent living, and self-advocacy outcomes for students with ID; and supports faculty, campus service providers, and families to meet the needs of students with ID.
College STAR	A grant-funded project that seeks to help campuses become more welcoming of students with learning differences across the University of North Carolina System.
Autism Speaks College Guide	Provides a comprehensive guide for college students on the autism spectrum. The guide covers topics such as transitioning to college, finding support services, and navigating campus life.
Autistic Self Advocacy Network	This toolkit is a valuable resource for supporting neurodivergent college students. It provides practical tools,

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(ASAN)

strategies, and information to enhance the college experience for individuals with autism and related conditions.

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## 5. Recommendations

Advocating for inclusive and supportive environments within higher education is crucial to improving outcomes for autistic students, such as increased retention rates, enhanced academic performance, and overall well-being (Petersson-Bloom & Holinquist, 2022). Empowering autistic students through tailored support programming can amplify their strengths, fostering improved self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-determination, and overall well-being. These programs provide the tools, skills, and resources necessary for autistic students to navigate higher education successfully, leveraging their unique abilities to achieve academic goals and cultivate a strong sense of belonging (White et al., 2016). In the realm of enhancing support for autistic college students, the collaboration of occupational therapists, psychologists, speech therapists, behavioral analysts, higher education administrators, policymakers, educators, and social workers is paramount. Each professional brings specialized expertise, contributing to a comprehensive and nuanced approach tailored to the unique needs of autistic individuals. Below are some recommendations on how these stakeholders can collaborate to provide effective support:

### 5.1 Social Workers

Bishop-Fitzpatrick (2019) underscores the critical need for social workers to take on leadership responsibilities in confronting the challenges experienced by autistic individuals. By championing meaningful inclusion, social justice, and economic equity, Bishop-Fitzpatrick underscores the indispensable expertise of social workers in both research and practice. Within the suggested framework, there's a delineation of short- and long-term objectives aiming for the extensive involvement of the social work profession in research, practice, education, and advocacy. This collective effort is geared toward providing comprehensive support for autistic individuals and their families.

Highlighting crucial roles for social workers, these responsibilities in supporting autistic college students and fostering inclusive higher education initiatives include conducting assessments to identify needs and service gaps. This involves exploring culturally responsive and neurodiversity-affirming mental health resources on and near campus, as well as identifying key points of contact. Social workers provide individual and group counseling, utilizing evidence-informed approaches for autistic students, both on campus and in appropriate off-campus locations. They play a pivotal role in training faculty and staff on effective communication strategies, offering resources for accommodations, and providing autism and anti-ableism training.

Additionally, social workers assist autistic students in developing self-advocacy and self-determination skills to secure academic adjustments. Collaborating with administrators, they



contribute to support program development, including the establishment of Peer Support Groups for community-connectedness and training for faculty and staff on disability community issues. Further, social workers champion inclusion through organizing expert discussions, workshops on campus, and the establishment of Disability Cultural Centers. These multifaceted responsibilities underscore the vital contributions of social workers in creating a supportive and inclusive higher education environment for autistic students.

Furthermore, social workers assume a leadership role in addressing the broader challenges faced by autistic individuals. Advocating for meaningful inclusion, social justice, and economic equity, social workers contribute by providing counseling support, facilitating peer connections, and fostering a sense of community. Their skills in research and practice enable them to play a vital role in creating a supportive and inclusive environment for autistic individuals. Social workers collaborate with other professionals, educators, and administrators to ensure a holistic and integrated support system that addresses the social and emotional well-being of autistic college students.

### *5.2 Educators in Higher Education*

Participating in ongoing professional development remains a cornerstone for educators, especially in honing effective teaching methods within college classrooms (Giangreco, 2010; Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020). To embrace a proactive approach to inclusivity, educators can incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (CAST, 2018) into their pedagogical approaches. This approach is acclaimed for its ability to guarantee accessibility for all students by offering flexibility in communication and instructional modalities. One illustration of UDL principles at work is the deliberate use of closed captioning during lectures—both video and in-person. This practice not only provides visual reinforcement but also furnishes written alternatives for auditory information, significantly aiding students by bolstering their comprehension, enabling diverse modes of expression, and fostering active engagement.

By pooling the expertise of these professionals alongside educators, these personalized plans can significantly enhance the academic journey and overall experience of autistic students. Collaboration with special education professionals is identified as a critical component in the educational realm, fostering the development of tailored support plans for autistic students (Cameron et al., 2022). This collaborative effort, combining the expertise of these professionals with educators, plays a pivotal role in enhancing the academic journey and overall experience of autistic individuals.

### *5.3 Higher Education Administrators*

To gauge the effectiveness of advocacy efforts in higher education, administrators need to assess institutional policies, gather feedback from autistic students highlighting their strengths, and observe positive shifts in campus culture that embrace neurodiversity (Anderson et al., 201a, 2017b, 2018c, 2019d). This evaluation involves employing surveys, focus groups, and continuous monitoring to ensure that initiatives align with a strengths-based approach and accommodate the diverse abilities of autistic individuals.

Collaborating with stakeholders such as local autism advocacy groups and support agencies is crucial for a comprehensive and coordinated approach in supporting autistic students (Savner & Brunner, 2018). Furthermore, administrators must prioritize systematic data collection on the academic and personal outcomes of autistic students. This data is essential for refining support programs and informing policy decisions, adhering to the principles of transparency and accountability in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

#### *5.4 Occupational Therapists*

Van Havermaet & Bielski (2017) emphasize the pivotal role of occupational therapists in providing vital support to autistic college students, focusing on the development of essential life skills. Through personalized assessments, these professionals identify specific challenges and strengths related to daily activities, sensory processing, and motor coordination. Tailored interventions are crafted to enhance students' abilities in navigating academic and social environments, promoting independence and self-sufficiency (Glennon, 2016). Furthermore, the authors highlight the valuable contribution of occupational therapists in shaping sensory-friendly spaces on campus, ensuring that environmental conditions align with the sensory needs of autistic individuals (Eckhol & Santistevan, 2018).

#### *5.5 Psychologists*

Psychologists can bring a depth of expertise in understanding the cognitive and emotional aspects for autistic college students. Through psychological assessments, they can uncover cognitive strengths and challenges, as well as emotional regulation difficulties that may impact academic performance. Psychologists can collaborate with students to develop coping strategies, stress management techniques, and social skills. Additionally, they work closely with educators and administrators to implement inclusive and supportive practices that foster positive mental health and well-being for autistic students in higher education (Lei & Russell, 2021).

#### *5.6 Speech and Language Therapists*

Speech therapists play a crucial role in improving communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal, for autistic college students. In their comprehensive assessments, professionals like Santhanam, Priya, and Hewitt (2021) identify specific communication challenges and customize interventions to enhance both expressive and receptive communication. Collaborating closely with educators, speech therapists implement communication supports within academic settings, enabling students to effectively express themselves and comprehend instructional content. Furthermore, they contribute to the establishment of a communication-friendly environment that caters to diverse communication styles and individual needs.

#### *5.7 Policymakers*

Policymakers hold a critical role in enforcing laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which mandates accommodations for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Advocating for adequate funding, in line with laws like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004,

is essential to support specialized programs tailored to meet the needs of autistic students. Hayes and Bulat (2017) stress policymakers' significant role in advocating increased funding, inclusive policies, and data analysis to enhance support systems.

Currently, funding for these programs primarily comes from various funding sources such as state appropriations, university funds, and private equity. Policymakers need to explore avenues to diversify funding sources for sustained and comprehensive support. Policy initiatives should prioritize inclusivity in higher education, address regulatory barriers, and ensure equal access to educational opportunities for autistic students (IDEA, 2004; ADA Amendments Act, 2008). This approach aligns with the broader goal of creating an inclusive educational landscape that values and supports diverse learning needs.

## **6. Conclusion**

Empowering autistic college students in higher education demands a collective effort involving diverse stakeholders (Chandrasekhar, 2020; Hillier et al., 2018a, 2019b, 2021c). The challenges faced—like high dropout rates, limited support, inadequate faculty training, and sparse data collection—highlight the urgent need for tailored programs in higher education. Immediate action is crucial. Institutions must implement specialized support programs offering tailored academic help, social skill building, mental health resources, and transition support (Hecker et al., 2019). Adequate funding and policies at all levels are vital for nationwide autistic support programs. It's unjust to deprive autistic students of needed support. Institutions must actively create inclusive environments and prioritize inclusive policies and funding. Stakeholders need to collaborate to empower these students, acknowledging their success enriches society. It's time for higher education to act, providing targeted programs tailored to their needs. Collaboration and action are imperative, as the future of an entire generation of autistic students is at stake.

## **Acknowledgments**

### **Author Contributions**

All authors contributed to the research, writing, and editing of this original work.

The authors express their sincere gratitude to Michael Barge, Drs. Marsha Hunn, Marilyn Pendelton, Adebimpe Adegbite, Christine Block, and Dr. Jeffery Yarvis for their invaluable support and mentorship throughout the preparation of this manuscript.

### **Funding**

None.

### **Informed Consent**

Obtained.

### **Provenance and Peer Review**

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request.

### Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

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