

SUPPORT NEEDS FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER BEYOND UNIVERSITY ACCOMMODATIONS: ENHANCING EDUCATOR AWARENESS — A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This literature review explores the needs of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in higher education while underscoring the gap in awareness of the required support for student success. Examining current research, this review identifies both the social and academic challenges faced by students with ASD, including mental health concerns, and the necessity for tailored support and training mechanisms. It emphasizes the need for enhanced educator awareness and institutional readiness to accommodate the needs of students with ASD. Recommendations include inclusive environments in higher education to improve academic outcomes for students with ASD.

Keywords: *autism spectrum disorder, students with ASD, post-secondary educator, higher education accommodations*

BACKGROUND

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a lifelong neurological condition, uniquely manifests in each individual, primarily affecting social relationships, communication, and behavioral patterns. These patterns include enduring repetitive behaviors and restricted interests (APA, 2022; Salari et al., 2022). Individuals with ASD face significant social challenges, such as difficulties in social communication, social interactions, and a preference for routine and sameness (APA, 2022; Bakker et al., 2023). Characteristic features of ASD include challenges with social referencing, reduced eye contact,

and alternative approaches to processing social information compared to neurotypical individuals (Bakker et al., 2023; DeQuinzio et al., 2019). Additionally, there is a notable prevalence of co-occurring conditions such as anxiety, stress, and feelings of isolation from support networks among those with ASD (Salari et al., 2022).

This literature review explores the needs of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in higher education while underscoring the gap in awareness of the required support for student success. A comprehensive review of relevant literature from the last 15 years was considered to gain an

informed view of the history of this complex issue. The literature review compiled main concepts from the literature to identify topics and themes. Throughout this literature review, higher education refers to postsecondary institutions representing a college or university that offers education beyond secondary or high school (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.).

The number of individuals with ASD pursuing higher education has been on the rise (Bakker et al., 2019; Bakker et al., 2023; Nachman, 2022), with estimates suggesting that 2% of post-secondary students may be on the autism spectrum (David et al., 2021; Ward & Webster, 2018). Despite this increase, students with ASD demonstrate a lower completion rate in post-secondary education compared to their neurotypical peers (Bakker et al., 2023; Chown et al., 2016). However, for those who graduate, there is an observed enhancement in quality-of-life indicators, such as employment rates, compared to individuals with ASD who do not complete their studies (David et al., 2021; Hendrickson et al., 2013). The reasons behind these educational outcomes remain underexplored, with existing research providing limited insight into the academic journey of students with ASD in higher education (Bakker et al., 2019; Bakker et al., 2023; Madaus et al., 2020). It is established, though, that students with autism face both social and academic hurdles, along with mental health challenges ranging from anxiety to eating disorders (Scott et al., 2021). These complexities often make it difficult for individuals with ASD to access the necessary support within post-secondary environments (Scott et al., 2021).

For many, the post-secondary experience is a blend of emotions, from excitement to stress, enriched by peer collaboration and personal connections. However, students with ASD frequently struggle to immerse themselves in this aspect of college life due to social interaction difficulties and tendencies toward isolation, which hampers their ability to form meaningful relationships (Bakker et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2021). Their academic performance is often further impacted by challenges in dealing with ambiguity, perspective-taking, and executive functioning (Bakker et al., 2019; Bakker et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2021). This makes the transition to and navigation of post-secondary education particularly challenging. Securing

accommodations, which may include modified requirements and extended deadlines, requires students with ASD to navigate bureaucratic processes, often necessitating executive functioning skills and the ability to communicate needs effectively, sometimes in writing (Strimel et al., 2023).

A focus on transition support from high school to college needs to be expanded to reflect the ongoing needs of students with ASD throughout their post-secondary education journey. Most postsecondary institutions support students with ASD via reasonable accommodations with an academic focus (Brown, 2017; Nelson et al., 2023). For example, over 93% of the institutions provide a note taker, the use of an audio recorder, extended exam time, and alternative testing locations (Brown, 2017). However, reasonable accommodations that address sensory and social limitations are less frequently offered; 44.7% of institutions provide sensory accommodations, 39.2% offer a single residence hall room for a reduced price, and 55.5% provide single rooms at cost (Brown, 2017). Recent research into support programs for students with ASD at postsecondary institutions highlights significant developments beyond the traditional high school-to-college transition support. According to a scoping review by Nelson et al. (2023), there is an increasing emphasis on creating equitable access and inclusive environments for students with ASD throughout their entire academic journey. This review identifies several types of support colleges and universities provide, such as social learning opportunities, functional life skills training, academic accommodations, emotional support, vocational training, and communication development. These supports are designed to address the unique challenges faced by students with ASD, such as sensory and social limitations, which often impact their academic performance and overall college experience.

Additionally, the review notes the importance of individualized support and the integration of perspectives of ASD in the development and implementation of these programs. For example, peer mentoring and quiet study spaces have been found beneficial in supporting the academic and social needs of students with ASD (Brown, 2017; Nelson et al., 2023). Furthermore, the presence of sensory-friendly environments and tailored support services can significantly enhance the educational

experiences of students with ASD. Despite these advancements, the review also highlights ongoing challenges, such as the need for better service navigation and the integration of supports across different domains to create a more holistic approach to supporting students with ASD in higher education (Nelson et al., 2023).

Davis et al. (2021) underscore the significant gap in research on adults with ASD, particularly regarding their experiences in post-secondary education. Most existing studies do not offer first-hand perspectives, leading Davis et al. (2021) to investigate the views of students with ASD themselves. The current scarcity of research on the support used or needed by students with ASD highlights an urgent need for post-secondary institutions to better understand and meet these students' needs. Without adequate support, there is a disconnect between the needs of students with ASD and the awareness and preparedness of post-secondary faculty and institutions to address these needs effectively. This article aims to critically review the literature on the support needs of earners with ASD in post-secondary education, beyond standard accommodations, to identify training mechanisms that help faculty and staff develop a deeper understanding of and ability to support students with ASD effectively.

THE CHALLENGE OF ACCESSING POST-SECONDARY ACCOMMODATIONS

Obtaining accommodations in higher education presents significant barriers, particularly in the transition from K-12, where parents or guardians often initiate accommodations through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 accommodation. In contrast, at the post-secondary level, without the same level of guardianship, individuals with ASD are required to request accommodation themselves proactively. These accommodations, mandated under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), must be accessible in any federally funded educational institution. However, the implementation and availability of these accommodations can significantly differ between institutions (Autism Speaks, 2023; Berndt, 2023). Students with ASD often face challenges with the advocacy and social skills necessary for navigating these processes. Additionally, adjustments to

course materials, a potential need for an effective accommodation, may be evaluated by staff with a limited understanding of ASD, questioning the effectiveness and inclusivity of laws intended to protect students with disabilities. Moreover, a notable trend is the reluctance of students with ASD to self-identify as disabled (Berndt, 2023), which further complicates their access to beneficial accommodations.

The research underscores a significant challenge in the self-disclosure and support-seeking behaviors among individuals with ASD in higher education. Cote et al. (2020) highlight that many students with ASD do not disclose their needs or seek support until they face problems. This reluctance is compounded by findings from Newman et al. (2011), showing a disconnect in self-perception of disability among students who had IEP/504 support in high school, with a substantial portion not recognizing their disability. This issue is critical, as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), a federal law that protects the privacy of student education records, limits faculty intervention without student-initiated accommodation requests (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99). The low rates of self-disclosure and accommodation-seeking, as detailed by Newman et al. (2011) and Cote et al. (2020), correlate with increased risks of depression, anxiety, and isolation, contributing to higher dropout rates. Further compounding these challenges are barriers to accessing accommodations and support, including the stigma around disclosure, navigating support systems, and fostering peer relationships, as discussed by Cai and Richdale (2016), David et al. (2021), and Vand Hees et al. (2015).

EXISTING ACCOMMODATIONS FOR LEARNERS WITH ASD

Brown (2017) and Kanahai (2024) have highlighted a growing recognition within universities of the unique needs of students with ASD, leading to the development and implementation of ASD-specific services and programs. These initiatives are specifically designed to facilitate the transition from high school to college for students with ASD, providing a comprehensive suite of support aimed at addressing their multifaceted needs. These supports include clinical services such as counseling, as well as assistance with residential and transportation needs, which aim to alleviate some of the

logistical and emotional challenges faced by students with ASD. Also, programs focus on enhancing social and academic skills, offering activities that support learning, support coursework development, and promote research engagement and participation in the academic community.

These initiatives are grounded in an ASD service model encompassing a broad range of support mechanisms, as detailed by Brown (2017) and further expanded upon by Kanahai (2024). This model prioritizes a holistic approach to support, integrating various forms of assistance to create a comprehensive support system for students with ASD. Despite these advancements, Brown (2017) and Kanahai (2024) observe that many universities still primarily focus on academic support, with less emphasis on accommodations for sensory sensitivities, which are crucial for the well-being of individuals with autism. While there is a general paucity of research on the effectiveness of specific accommodations in higher education for students with ASD, existing systematic reviews, such as those by David et al. (2021) and Gelbar et al. (2014), have identified a range of supports that have been beneficial. These supports include note-taking services, tutoring, and test accommodations, which address some of the academic challenges faced by students with ASD (Nelson et al., 2023). Beyond academic assistance, social supports such as social skills training and mentorship programs have also been recognized for their positive impact on students with ASD, helping them navigate the social aspects of college life more effectively (Anderson et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2021; Gelbar et al., 2014).

ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

Professional support, accommodations for testing and in-class activities, and coursework adjustments were the academic support methods most frequently reported. This includes specialized testing environments, provision of lecture notes and scribing services, extensions for assignment deadlines, curriculum adjustments, and enhanced professor involvement (Davis et al., 2021). Additional accommodations for tests, such as additional time and the option to take exams in a smaller group setting, are effective strategies for reducing stress and aiding in executive function management (Anderson et al., 2017; Gelbar et al., 2014; Kuder & Accardo, 2018).

NON-ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

Davis et al. (2021) highlight that the predominant non-academic supports for students with ASD in higher education include social skill development, peer-assisted support, and professional assistance, including counseling, services from university disability support, and parental guidance, along with accommodations related to housing and transport. This aligns with Anderson et al. (2017) findings on the importance of social skills training and non-academic mentorship, as well as with Davis et al. (2021) and Gelbar et al. (2014), who noted the significance of peer support, parental involvement, and counseling in supporting college students with ASD.

BARRIERS TO ACCOMMODATION ACCESS

Studies indicate that students with ASD possess key skills conducive to success in higher education, such as strong memory capabilities, attention to detail, creative thinking, and a keen interest in learning (Von Below et al., 2021). However, as Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) highlight, ASD presents heterogeneously, with each student displaying unique coping mechanisms and abilities (Von Below et al., 2021). Despite having the necessary skills for academic achievement, students with ASD frequently face significant academic and personal obstacles that impede their full potential (Pinder-Amaker, 2014; VanBergeijk et al., 2008; Von Below et al., 2021). Research by Cai and Richdale (2016) and Jackson et al. (2018) shows that many college campuses are inadequately equipped to meet the educational requirements of students with ASD. Newman et al. (2011) found that the completion rates for earners with ASD are about 40%, which is 12% lower than the average for the general student population, as indicated by Von Below et al. (2021). These lower outcomes are often attributed to the various barriers that students with ASD face.

One significant hurdle in higher education for students with ASD is the difficulty in self-disclosure and navigating the support system, compounded by the challenge of obtaining an accurate diagnosis for accessing necessary accommodations. Bargiela et al. (2016), Rutherford et al. (2016), and Von Below et al. (2021) have documented the obstacles to receiving a formal diagnosis, especially for females and those without co-morbid

intellectual disabilities, who often go undiagnosed. Furthermore, individuals with a diagnosis may be reluctant to disclose it to educational institutions due to previous bullying, fear of discrimination, and a perceived lack of understanding (Cai & Richdale, 2016; Cox et al., 2017; Sarette, 2018; Vincent et al., 2017; Von Below et al., 2021). With a formal diagnosis, disability services can collaborate with the student to pinpoint and implement the necessary accommodations.

The effectiveness, however, of Disability Support Offices (DSOs) in meeting students with ASD's unique needs is questioned, with issues arising from insufficient resources and a limited understanding of ASD's diversity (Cai & Richdale, 2016; David et al., 2021; Kim, 2022; VanBergeijk & Cavanagh, 2012; Van Hees et al., 2014). Accommodations, when provided, are often too generalized, failing to cater adequately to the specific requirements of students with ASD (Von Below et al., 2021). Systemic barriers, such as bias and misinformation among university staff and students, further complicate the situation (Bakker et al., 2019). Existing accommodations frequently adopt a one-size-fits-all strategy that does not account for the spectrum nature of ASD, neglecting sensory, social, academic, or psychiatric needs specific to individuals with ASD (Jasen et al., 2018; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Sarret, 2018; Von Below et al., 2021).

There are instances where accommodations are not adhered to by lecturers despite legal obligations to do so (Sarret, 2018; Von Below et al., 2021). This non-compliance can extend to class activities, materials, or classroom facilitation, preventing learners with ASD from achieving success (Von Below et al., 2021). These findings highlight the urgent need for colleges and universities to create individualized, student-focused accommodations by involving students with ASD in developing support mechanisms that meet their distinct needs.

INSTITUTIONAL GUIDELINES AND FEDERAL SUPPORT

The Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) emphasizes that disability resource professionals (DRPs) who determine accommodations for students with disabilities must consider various factors. These include medical documentation, the student's narrative, the specific context for requested accommodations, what federal law deems as "reasonable" accommo-

dations, and the professional judgment of the DRPs (Gaddy, 2012; Hsiao et al., 2018; Laird-Metke, 2016; Ofiesh et al., 2004; Strimel et al., 2023). The Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE), part of the federal Department of Education, oversees guidelines for supporting students with ASD and aims to improve college and university support systems for enhancing higher education access and completion in the United States (HHS, 2017). This effort includes promoting the integration of students with intellectual disabilities into higher education, highlighted by programs such as the Model Transition Program for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) (HHS, 2017). Additionally, the Americans with Disabilities Act, especially Section 504, requires postsecondary institutions to adapt academic requirements that unjustly affect students with disabilities, provided these modifications do not compromise the essential elements of the course or program. These determinations are made through discussions with educators and reviewing course content (42 USC § 12101 et seq.; ADA, 1990).

The push for educational inclusion has evolved significantly, tracing back to the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, which was crucial in integrating marginalized students into mainstream educational frameworks (Temple & Ylitalo, 2009). The U.S. IDEA Act is central to this evolution, ensuring students with disabilities are placed in the least restrictive environment possible and have access to tailored education plans. Similar legislative efforts in Canada and Australia reinforce the commitment to educational access and equality (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018; Fournier et al., 2016; Government of Canada, 2018a). Section 504 complements these efforts by facilitating accommodations in higher education through Disability Services Offices (DSOs) (Kim, 2022). This progression underscores a larger trend toward acknowledging and appreciating neurodiversity in the educational landscape, marking a significant shift from the origins of civil rights to the current emphasis on the rights of disabled and neurodiverse individuals (Wolbring, 2008).

SENSORY AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES IN POST-SECONDARY CLASSROOMS

There is no single approach or universal guideline for institutions to address the needs of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD); instead,

it is up to individual institutions to develop tailored strategies. For example, students with ASD may find large class sizes to be daunting due to the numerous sensory inputs, leading to sensory overload. The less structured college environment, coupled with increased distractions on campus, can also trigger anxiety in these students (David et al., 2021; Jansen et al., 2018). Students with ASD often face unique learning challenges in physical educational settings. Sensory sensitivities, including reactions to noise levels, odors, and visual clutter, can make traditional classroom environments uncomfortable for some students with ASD to engage in learning (Davis et al., 2021; Sarrett, 2018). A comprehensive and flexible approach that considers the unique needs of each student is essential for creating an inclusive and supportive educational environment for students with ASD.

Research has explored the idea that students with ASD may struggle with problem-solving due to challenges with or without “theory of mind” (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985; Dente & Coles, 2012; Moyer, 2018). Theory of mind is the ability to understand and attribute mental states to oneself and others, using this understanding to interpret and predict behavior (Warrier & Baron-Cohen, 2017). Early interpretations by Bretherton and Beeghly (1982) suggested that children from two to six years old lack the capacity to see from another’s perspective, aligning with Piaget’s observations. However, later studies challenged this viewpoint, indicating that theory of mind can be evident in children as young as 28 months (Bretherton & Beeghly, 1982; Davis et al., 2021).

VARIABILITY IN DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES ACROSS POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

It should be noted that while many universities provide various support services for students with disabilities, there is significant variability in the types and extent of these services. Each institution determines its own offerings, leading to different student experiences across the country. This lack of standardized services results in a wide range of available accommodations and supports, which can significantly impact the academic success and overall experience of students with disabilities. Research highlights that while disability services offices often provide essential accommodations

such as academic adjustments and instructional interventions, the comprehensiveness and quality of these services can vary widely (Melián & Meneses, 2022; Nelson et al., 2023). For example, many universities focus on providing academic accommodations like note-taking services, extended exam times, and alternative testing locations, but they may fall short in addressing sensory and social limitations that are crucial for students with ASD (Brown, 2017; Melián & Meneses, 2022; Nelson et al., 2023).

The adoption of universal design principles, which aim to create accessible and inclusive environments for all students, is still limited in higher education (Nelson et al., 2023). While some institutions are making strides in this area, integrating such principles into everyday practices remains inconsistent (Nelson et al., 2023). This inconsistency can lead to gaps in support, making it challenging for students with disabilities to navigate their academic and social environments effectively. To improve the academic experience of students with disabilities, universities need to streamline procedures for disclosing disabilities, provide personalized and sensitive support, and foster an inclusive environment through long-term institutional policies and specific services that address the diverse needs of students (Melián & Meneses, 2022). By enhancing these areas, institutions can better support the success and well-being of students with disabilities in higher education.

FACULTY PERCEPTIONS AND TEACHING PRACTICES

Nachman (2022) performed a systematic literature review that unveiled how educators’ views on interacting with students with ASD significantly depend on their awareness of ASD and personal experience with the condition. Teachers with a thorough understanding of ASD, who also prioritize social justice, often see enhanced educational outcomes for their students with ASD by acknowledging and nurturing their capabilities, thereby helping these students to live up to the high standards set in their classrooms (Austin & Peña, 2017; Nachman, 2022). Moreover, those educators who consistently incorporate structure and cater to the emotional needs of their students with ASD have been identified as more effective in promoting

the academic success of these learners (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Nachman, 2022).

The importance of staff members having adequate awareness and knowledge about ASD is also emphasized by students with ASD themselves, as noted in studies by Cai and Richdale (2016), Kim (2022), and Van Hees et al. (2014). Richardson (2017) underscores the value of a supportive educational setting, pointing out that under such conditions, students with ASD can achieve academic performance on par with their non-disabled peers. However, students with ASD in higher education often hesitate to disclose their diagnosis to instructors, schools, and peers (Cox et al., 2017) due to negative experiences in the past. While inclusion in mainstream classrooms is generally beneficial for students with ASD, Ravet (2011) identified research indicating that such inclusion could be problematic when viewed as too challenging by some educators. The mindset of teachers toward diverse students and differentiated learning styles directly impacts the outcomes for these students. Research has shown that the positive academic and social outcomes for students with ASD in mainstream settings rely on the educators' comprehension of ASD and their attitudes toward inclusion (Davis et al., 2021; Ravet, 2011).

When students with ASD are perceived by their instructors as deficient or dependent, interactions with teachers may devolve into efforts to force them to conform to conventional norms, which can be detrimental to the students with ASD well-being. Such practices, aimed at making students with ASD fit into a "normal" mold, only serve to perpetuate discrimination and can significantly harm the mental health of students who are unable to alter their neurological condition, leaving them feeling inadequate or damaged (Davis et al., 2021). Rhonda von Below et al. (2021) argue for the critical need for higher education teachers to be well-versed in ASD to foster an ASD-friendly environment that empowers students to utilize their strengths. The challenge is exacerbated by the fact that individuals with limited knowledge about ASD are often oblivious to their own knowledge deficits, a significant issue since general studies demonstrate no link between perceived and actual ASD knowledge, with the less informed frequently overestimat-

ing their understanding (McMahon et al., 2020; Rhonda von Below et al., 2021). This highlights the urgent need for universities to identify and fulfill the training needs of their staff to sufficiently support students with autism.

METHODS

A systematic review of relevant literature from 2008 to 2024 was considered to gain an informed and historical view of this evolving and complex issue. The literature review compiled main concepts from the literature to identify topics and themes. Basic steps guided the methodology; thus, the following databases were utilized to locate supporting research: ProQuest, Google Scholar, ERIC, ScienceDirect, Academic Search Complete, SAGE Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, and Education Research. The keywords used in searches as well as search notifications included *post-secondary educators*, *post-secondary autistic learners/students*, *neurodivergent learners*, *autistic learners*, *post-secondary professional development on working with autistic learners*, *training for post-secondary educators working with students with ASD*, *teacher's training for neurodivergent learners*, *post-secondary autistic learners' supports*, *post-secondary autistic learners' needs*, *post-secondary autistic accommodations*, and *post-secondary autistic learners' barriers to accommodations*.

The appraisal process centered around the inclusion and exclusion of pre-defined literature. The review of quality assessment criteria led to the synthesis of extracting and categorizing the data. During analysis, the following topics and themes related to the variables emerged: post-secondary education accommodations, post-secondary supports for students with ASD, post-secondary needed supports for students with ASD, barriers to supports/accommodations for post-secondary students with ASD, post-secondary students with ASD, IDEA post-secondary accommodations, IDEA, IEP/504 accommodations in post-secondary education, post-secondary educators' perception of students with ASD, and post-secondary educators training on working with students with ASD.

Ultimately, the systematic literature review's methodology utilized the SALSA framework: search, appraisal, synthesis, and analysis to identify significant themes (Cronin et al., 2008).

Furthermore, this process enabled the exploration of the needs of students with ASD in higher education while underscoring the gap in awareness of the required support for student success.

RESULTS

With the ongoing increase in students with ASD pursuing higher education, it is critical for universities and their faculty to not only raise their awareness but also modify their educational practices to support these learners effectively. Rhonda von Below et al. (2021) highlight the importance of ASD awareness and knowledge among higher education teachers as fundamental to creating an ASD-friendly university environment, enabling students to utilize their strengths fully. This challenge is exacerbated by individuals with limited ASD knowledge who remain unaware of their knowledge gaps. This is particularly troubling, as general population studies reveal no correlation between perceived and actual ASD knowledge, with less knowledgeable individuals often overestimating their understanding (McMahon et al., 2020; Rhonda von Below et al., 2021). This discrepancy underscores the urgent need for universities to recognize and address the training needs of staff to adequately support students with ASD.

The perception of students with ASD as lacking or dependent by their instructors can negatively affect student-teacher interactions, potentially leading to efforts to coerce or cajole them into conforming to mainstream classroom norms (Spandler, 2007). Such attempts at inclusion, which pressure students with ASD to adhere to an ideal of “normalcy,” are not only detrimental to their well-being but also reinforce institutional and societal discrimination against those who are neurodivergent. This can severely impact the mental welfare of students with ASD, who, unable to change their neurological makeup, are left feeling inferior or flawed (Davis et al., 2021). While inclusion in mainstream classrooms has been shown to benefit students with ASD, Ravet (2011) indicates that their success can be compromised by teachers who view them as challenging. Teachers’ attitudes toward diversity in the classroom directly influence student outcomes, with several large-scale studies demonstrating that positive experiences for students with ASD in mainstream settings hinge on the teacher’s understanding of ASD and their

attitudes toward inclusion (David et al., 2021; Ravet, 2011).

Given these insights, it is recommended that post-secondary educators become more knowledgeable about and receptive to students with ASD. Institutions should provide professional development opportunities surrounding training mechanisms to ensure educators understand the unique needs and potential of students with ASD. Additionally, educators must examine their biases and attitudes toward these students, recognizing their crucial role in fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Adjustments and accommodations in teaching styles are necessary to cater to the diverse needs of students with ASD, ensuring their educational journey is both enriching and affirming.

CONCLUSION

This review has elucidated the need for higher education institutions to intentionally enhance educator awareness to effectively address the unique needs of students with ASD through more personalized and inclusive support systems. Although there have been strides in initiating programs for students with ASD, evaluating these programs remains scant, with a noted lack of systematic assessment or empirical validation of their effectiveness (Barnhill, 2016; Kanahai, 2024). As the presence of students with ASD in higher education grows, alongside an increase in non-academic support, there is a notable discrepancy in the availability and accessibility of academic support services, indicating a pressing need for these institutions to broaden and enhance academic assistance (David et al., 2021).

Furthermore, universities should offer professional development for faculty and staff to diminish the stigma around utilizing support systems, ensuring a more accommodating and stigma-free educational environment that fosters human flourishing. This system approach is vital for enabling students with ASD to realize their full potential in academic, social, and career development.

LIMITATIONS

This literature review identifies limitations that warrant further exploration. The focus on how higher education institutions (HEIs) can cultivate an inclusive environment that honors students’ rights under FERPA while also promoting parental involvement is notably constrained. This limitation

emphasizes the need for additional research into the internal policies and procedures that HEIs employ regarding the intersection of student rights and parental engagement.

Similarly, the existing literature fails to adequately address discrepancies in accommodation practices between lecturers and professors, revealing a significant gap in the understanding of how these differences impact students with ASD. This limitation highlights the urgent need for targeted research investigating the internal policies and procedures of HEIs and faculty concerning accommodations for students with ASD. Addressing these limitations through further research could significantly enhance the literature surrounding inclusive practices in higher education and foster a more nuanced awareness of institutional policies that support students with ASD.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Universities must ensure that all staff know the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations, particularly concerning students who are dependents of their parents. FERPA grants parents the right to access their children's educational records if the student is claimed as a dependent on the parent's most recent federal income tax return. This regulation ensures that parents can stay informed about their child's academic progress and any support services utilized. Schools should provide clear guidance on how parents can request access to these records while maintaining compliance with FERPA (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99).

Universities should include specific informational flyers in all student orientation packets to ensure equal access to support services. These flyers should detail how to access support services, including step-by-step instructions on filling out necessary forms and identifying the appropriate office or disability services worker to contact. Providing clear examples and comprehensive guidance can help demystify the process and encourage more students to utilize available resources.

It is recommended that universities adopt policies to provide comprehensive professional development to all staff involved in teaching, including adjuncts, lecturers, and professors. Training should cover accommodation policies, FERPA rules, Individuals with Disabilities Education

Act (IDEA) regulations, and on-campus support services available for students with disabilities, including ASD. Such training should also address maintaining accommodations in various class formats (online, hybrid, and in-person) and promote an inclusive and supportive educational environment.

Secondary schools should collaborate closely with universities to facilitate a smoother transition for students with ASD into post-secondary education. This can be achieved by organizing information sessions facilitated by high school counselors where university representatives explain the process of accessing support services to families. High school counselors should also help arrange on-campus visits focusing on disability services, allowing students and their families to familiarize themselves with available resources. Additionally, high school counselors should provide training and workshops to empower students to advocate for their own needs, ensuring they understand how to request accommodations and navigate university support systems effectively.

By implementing these recommendations, higher education institutions can better support the academic success and well-being of students with ASD, ensuring they have the resources and understanding needed to thrive in their academic pursuits.

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