

Postsecondary Education Supports: Continuing the Conversation

A product of the 2023 Annual Canadian Autism Leadership Summit

This brief is a product of Autism Alliance of Canada's 2023 Canadian Autism Leadership Summit (“Summit”). It contains information about the event, what we talked about there, and what comes next for the Alliance based on the event. Here, we talk about building collaboration in the area of postsecondary education supports for Autistic students. Participants included practitioners at universities and colleges, Autistic advocates, caregivers, policymakers, community organization representatives, and researchers.

What You Can Do with this Brief

As a Policymaker

This brief can provide you with important information about the postsecondary education supports landscape in Canada. It can also show you what the community thinks is most important, so you can focus on those things in your work.

As a Researcher

This brief can give you ideas about what we still need to learn about postsecondary education supports in Canada. It might inspire you to explore new research topics.

As a Community Leader

This brief can help you start discussions in your community and help you put postsecondary education experiences and support needs in context.

As an Advocate

This brief can be a good starting point for talking to policymakers and others about postsecondary education support needs.



Current Landscape

Autistic people in Canada are increasingly seeking out postsecondary education options. Yet supports for Autistic students attending Canada's universities, colleges, and other postsecondary institutions are currently underdeveloped. But recognition of the unmet needs of Autistic adults at this important life stage, and of the critical need to act, is beginning to grow. Areas for improvement range from preparation for entry, to services and supports for life within postsecondary settings, and training for life after graduation, including entry to the workforce. Unfortunately, half of Autistic youth in Canada feel disconnected from employment or education opportunities in the first two years following high school. Autistic postsecondary students report unique support needs in the areas of social interaction, communication, executive functioning, and academics. They are also at risk of a range of negative outcomes, including experiencing social isolation and other mental health issues, feeling under-supported, and dropping out. Research confirms they graduate at a lower rate than their non-Autistic peers.

Autism Alliance of Canada recognizes the need to mobilize a collective effort to innovate and boost the scale of progress towards equitable, consistent and effective support and vocational training programs for the high proportions of Autistic and other neurodivergent people that enter postsecondary education. There is a growing consensus that the time is right to form a collaborative network to brainstorm and leverage their shared knowledge and experience.

Advancing the Conversation: What We Heard

From the speakers

Attendees watched a [presentation](#) by Lee Burdette-Williams of the US-based *College Autism Network* about the postsecondary education landscape and the US experience of forming a network. This was followed by a [panel of six experts](#) that included researchers and practitioners from across Canada presenting on their perspectives and initiatives, moderated by **Orly Fruchter** from the Azrieli Foundation.

Dr. Lee Burdette Williams (Executive Director, College Autism Network) introduced the [College Autism Network](#) (CAN), a non-profit organization in the United States focused on improving the experiences and outcomes of Autistic college students. The network

emphasizes the need for constant communication between practitioners and researchers to ensure the work that each group does influences each other positively. CAN has established a power grid of resources to support neurodivergent individuals, including job boards, a speakers bureau, online learning opportunities, and an annual conference. CAN's work encompasses three stages of the neurodivergent student lifecycle: moving in, moving through, and moving on:

Moving in

involves preparing students to transition from high school to postsecondary education and helping them identify the right institution based on their support needs.

Moving through

focuses on the programs and initiatives provided on campus to support academic, social, and emotional experiences.

Moving on

involves transitioning from campus to the workforce or independent living.

Panel: Building Collaboration in Autism Postsecondary Education Supports

Dr. Patty Douglas (Associate Professor, Brandon University) described the [*Re-Storying Autism in Education*](#) project she leads. This project focuses on creating digital stories and conducting interviews to explore educational experiences. She presented quotes from the project showing how Autistic students often describe postsecondary campuses and classrooms as overwhelming, leading to anxiety and burnout. Ableism, colonization and racism contribute to a negative environment for neurodivergent students.

Jess Lopez (Neurodiversity Support Advisor, University of Calgary) defined neurodiversity, which encompasses multiple neurological differences and considers neurodivergent people to diverge from the social standard of neurotypical ways.

Dr. Heather Brown (Associate Professor, University of Alberta) introduced the [*Campus Belonging Network*](#), aimed at enhancing accessibility and success for Autistic postsecondary students. The network promotes supports, strategies, and awareness, including alternative evaluation methods, sensory safe spaces, and transition support.

Dr. Megan Ames (Assistant Professor, University of Victoria) conducted a [*website review*](#) of postsecondary institutions and found inequalities in autism-specific accommodations, primarily in central Canada or Ontario.

Simone Daniels (Research Assistant, Autism Alliance of Canada) conducted a rapid review on academic accommodations for Autistic graduate students, finding a lack of specific supports.

Jenna Gauthier (Manager, NorQuest College) introduced [*Autism CanTech!*](#), a program at NorQuest College that provides training, employability skills, and work experiences for Autistic people in the tech industry, along with robust supports and flexibility.

From our members

Following the panel presentations, Summit attendees participated in **group discussions** where they were asked to reflect on guiding questions. They then recorded their answers and ideas on sticky notes (online participants recorded virtual sticky note ideas using Jamboard). The sticky notes were collected and similar ideas were grouped together. The three boxes below summarize the **types of ideas** that people shared in response to the questions posed. Participants identified several problems faced by Autistic postsecondary students (*Box 1*), and a number of different types of challenges to providing needed postsecondary education supports at the system level (*Box 2*).

Box 1. Types of problems faced by Autistic postsecondary education students that were most endorsed by participants

- Lack of understanding and acceptance of autism on campus
- Burden on the student to navigate & advocate for supports
- Lack of accessibility
- Transitioning into post-secondary education
- Need for a diagnosis to access supports
- Social difficulties
- Little Autistic representation or role models
- Few mental health supports

Examples of comments related to “Lack of understanding and acceptance of autism on campus”

“Too much ableist thinking is entrenched within the institution.”

“Lack of understanding of autism, especially from neurodiversity and culturally-affirming perspectives. We need more affirming perspectives on campus.”

“Language/labels, which manifest in stigma.”



Examples of comments related to “Burden on the student to navigate / advocate for supports”

“Unsure of how to navigate supports even if there are many offered.”

“Navigating systems - e.g., emails, bureaucratic procedures, having to provide private medical information.”

“The idea that one size fits all does not work for everyone with respect to accommodations.”

Box 2. Types of challenges to providing needed postsecondary education supports at the systems-level

- Lack of evaluation or evidence of what works
- Siloed approaches to designing solutions
- Lack of resources or funding
- Lack of Autistic stakeholder involvement in design
- Lack of standards across post-secondary education institutions

Example of comment that related to “Lack of evaluation or evidence of what works”.

“Lack of knowledge mobilization across post-secondary institutions.”

Example of comment that related to “Siloed approaches to designing solutions”

“There needs to be a re-think that accommodations and supports are required 24-7 not just for classes. Living in residence can be awful with no sensitivity training.”

“Comprehensive transition programs--many schools offer a one day workshop, maybe some reading material.”

“Transitioning to a new environment that has less structure, less direction, may be away from long standing supports, less structure on campus.”



Additionally, participants identified the individuals and groups best positioned to adopt and implement changes to improve postsecondary education supports for Autistic students (*Box 3*).

Box 3. The people best positioned to adopt or implement changes aimed at improving postsecondary education supports for Autistic students, as endorsed by participants

- Academic staff (professors, department heads)
- Accessibility services staff and innovators
- Institutional administrators and leaders
- Autistic students
- Autistic faculty and staff (as mentors, role models, advocates, and stakeholders)
- Governments (federal, provincial-territorial, municipal)
- Employers and vocational support professionals
- Researchers
- High school educators and administration (support transitioning into postsecondary education)
- Family members
- Care professionals
- Partnerships among the above

Example of comments that related to “Academic staff (professors, department heads)”

“Faculty who practice UDL [Universal Design for Learning] and who are situated in inclusive education, disability studies, and applied fields like social work.”

“Students, Faculty, Administrators, program coordinators, and program evaluators.”

“Faculty, residence staff, various teaching/program departments.”

Example of comments that related to “Accessibility services staff and innovators”

“People who come from different intersectional frameworks.”

“Peer mentorship programs, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, & Accessibility strategists and coordinators, postsecondary disability support services.”

“At the institutions - disability support offices, centres for technology, equity, diversity, and inclusion offices and officers.”



Next Steps: What We Will Do at the Alliance

Autism Alliance of Canada has received feedback from session participants, including speakers and invitees, expressing strong enthusiasm for collaborative efforts in improving postsecondary education support. They have identified practical ways to make a positive impact in this area. The Alliance has followed up and started an interest group list, which includes those who want to stay updated or participate in future collaborative work.

Autism Alliance of Canada is committed to playing a supporting role in knowledge mobilization, dissemination, and bringing together interested parties from across the country to collaborate on the priorities of youth as they emerge into adulthood. At our **2024 Canadian Autism Leadership Summit**, we will continue the conversation about postsecondary education supports.

If you are interested in meeting with and learning from others to help drive progress in this field, we encourage you to join us at CALS2024.



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