Benchmarks to Inclusion: Creating Core Principles to Facilitate Autistic Student Success in Higher Education

As more autistic individuals enter higher education across the United States, college campuses have begun to explore how to best facilitate the success of these students. Many campuses have created support programs specifically for autistic students; however, there are no universal standards for what kinds of support these programs should provide. Furthermore, the way that "success" is defined for autistic students varies across the research agenda, and few studies that have focused specifically on autism in college include the voices of autistic college students themselves.

In order to gain a better understanding of what colleges can do to facilitate autistic student success, ASAN interviewed a group of autistic college students and experts within the field of disability and higher education. We established how "success" could be defined and measured for autistic students, as well as what barriers students faced when trying to achieve this success. We also discussed what institutions of higher education could do to help autistic students achieve success.

Participants identified self-satisfaction, inclusion, employment outcomes, and self-determination as factors that could be measured to indicate autistic student success. While retention/graduation rates and academic achievement were noted as additional important aspects of success, interviewees cautioned that these measures could overlook aspects of campus life and post-graduation outcomes that students felt contributed more to their overall feelings of success. When discussing barriers to success, participants cited 4 main issues: transitioning into college, accessing disability accommodations, stigma surrounding disability, and the hidden physical, mental, and financial costs of being a disabled student. They discussed a variety of ways that campuses could address these barriers, such as through transition programs, a more streamlined process to receive disability services, dedicated spaces to build autistic community, and disability equity and inclusion training for students and staff.

ASAN also asked participants their thoughts regarding on-campus autism support programs. Interviewees had mixed feelings and experiences within these programs, and emphasized that these programs should focus on providing support that helps students achieve their

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goals while integrating them into the broader campus environment. They cautioned that programs that placed additional financial burdens on students or segregated students from their non-disabled peers could be actively harmful to facilitating autistic student success.

We used this feedback to create a set of core principles that campuses should keep in mind in order to help autistic students succeed. We hope to use these principles to guide further research on how campuses might implement systemic change to improve the outcomes of students with disabilities:

10 Core Principles to Facilitate Autistic Student Success in Higher Education

1. Make disability an institutional priority, such as through committing more financial resources to support disabled students, or creating a disability advisory board.

2. Focus on creating spaces that are physically, sensorily, and socially accessible to autistic students, whether in academic settings or otherwise.

3. Provide student-centered disability accommodations that help autistic students achieve their goals.

4. Facilitate social inclusion through socialization opportunities between autistic and non-autistic students.

5. Develop a centralized source for information regarding disability services.

6. Ensure cost parity for disability accommodations and other services autistic students need.

7. Foster cultural competence between marginalized groups on campus, such as between disability-specific programs and programs that serve students of color.

8. Implement additional supports for autistic students, such as mental health supports, independent living supports, and diagnostic testing.

9. Include all autistic people in campus initiatives, regardless of support needs. Work to welcome students who have been historically excluded, such as non-speaking students or autistic students of color.

10. Center autistic student voices when working to improve the college experience for autistic students.