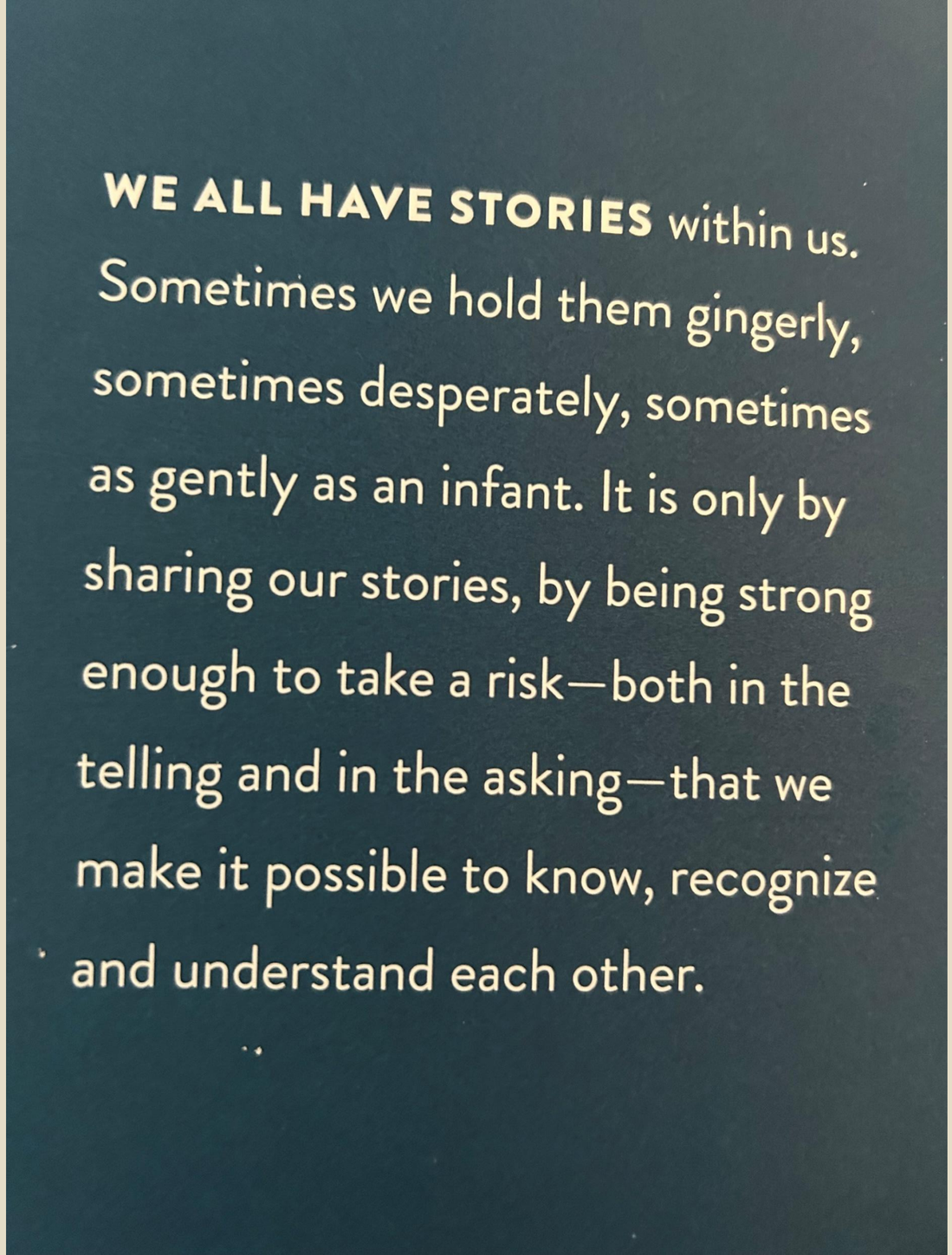
Supporting Neurodiversity in Post-Secondary Education

February 4, 2025: Student Voices on Neurodiversity: A Panel Discussion
February 10, 2025: Compassionate Planning for Neurodiverse Learners (Workshop)
February 11, 2025: Advancing Neuroinclusivity in Post-Secondary Education: Evidence, Initiatives, and Pathways Forward (Panel)
February 13 & 27, 2025: Supporting Neurodiversity in Higher Education: a two-part workshop series



BCcampus
Learning. Doing. Leading.

By Richard Wagamese
What Comes From Spirit
p. 134

Agenda

1) Making the Invisible Visible by Dr. Jennifer Fane

Q & A

2) Peer Mentorship Models by Dr. Megan Ames

Q & A

3) SFU Autism Mentorship Initiative by Drs. Elina Birmingham & Grace Iarocci

Q & A

4) Access Programs at Capilano University by Alison Hale & Kathy Moscrip

Q & A

5) Q &A

The Conference Board of Canada

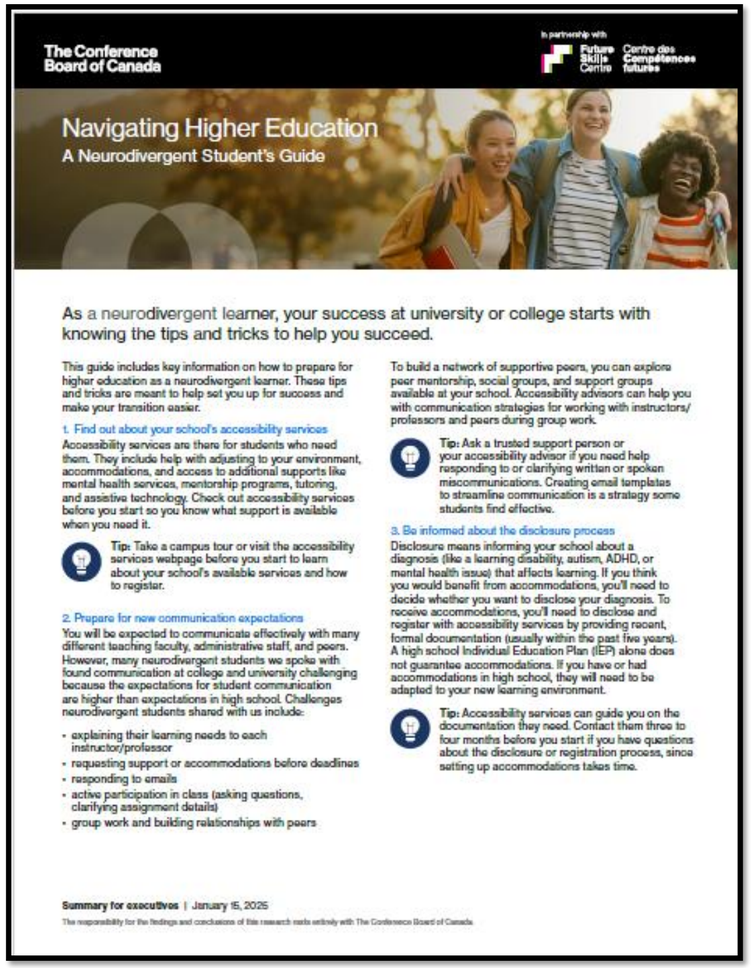
Making the Invisible Visible: The Neuroinclusivity of Canadian Post-secondary Education

Advancing Neuroinclusivity in Post-Secondary Education: Evidence, Initiatives, and Pathways Forward

Jennifer Fane, PhD, Lead Research Associate, Education & Skills

Publications and Resources

Navigating Higher Education: A Neurodivergent Student Guide



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Navigating Higher Education

A Neurodivergent Student's Guide

As a neurodivergent learner, your success at university or college starts with knowing the tips and tricks to help you succeed.

This guide includes key information on how to prepare for higher education as a neurodivergent learner. These tips and tricks are meant to help set you up for success and make your transition easier.

1. Find out about your school's accessibility services

Accessibility services are there for students who need them. They include help with adjusting to your environment, accommodations, and access to additional supports like mental health services, mentorship programs, tutoring, and assistive technology. Check out accessibility services before you start so you know what support is available when you need it.

Tip: Take a campus tour or visit the accessibility services webpage before you start to learn about your school's available services and how to register.

2. Prepare for new communication expectations

You will be expected to communicate effectively with many different teaching faculty, administrative staff, and peers. However, many neurodivergent students we spoke with found communication at college and university challenging because the expectations for student communication are higher than expectations in high school. Challenges neurodivergent students shared with us include:

- explaining their learning needs to each instructor/professor
- requesting support or accommodations before deadlines
- responding to emails
- active participation in class (asking questions, clarifying assignment details)
- group work and building relationships with peers

To build a network of supportive peers, you can explore peer mentorship, social groups, and support groups available at your school. Accessibility advisors can help you with communication strategies for working with instructors/professors and peers during group work.

Tip: Ask a trusted support person or your accessibility advisor if you need help responding to or clarifying written or spoken miscommunications. Creating email templates to streamline communication is a strategy some students find effective.

3. Be informed about the disclosure process

Disclosure means informing your school about a diagnosis (like a learning disability, autism, ADHD, or mental health issue) that affects learning. If you think you would benefit from accommodations, you'll need to decide whether you want to disclose your diagnosis. To receive accommodations, you'll need to disclose and register with accessibility services by providing recent, formal documentation (usually within the past five years). A high school Individual Education Plan (IEP) alone does not guarantee accommodations. If you have or had accommodations in high school, they will need to be adapted to your new learning environment.

Tip: Accessibility services can guide you on the documentation they need. Contact them three to four months before you start if you have questions about the disclosure or registration process, since setting up accommodations takes time.

Summary for executives | January 15, 2025

The responsibility for the findings and conclusions of this research rests entirely with The Conference Board of Canada.

Research Report: Survey Data

The Conference Board of Canada

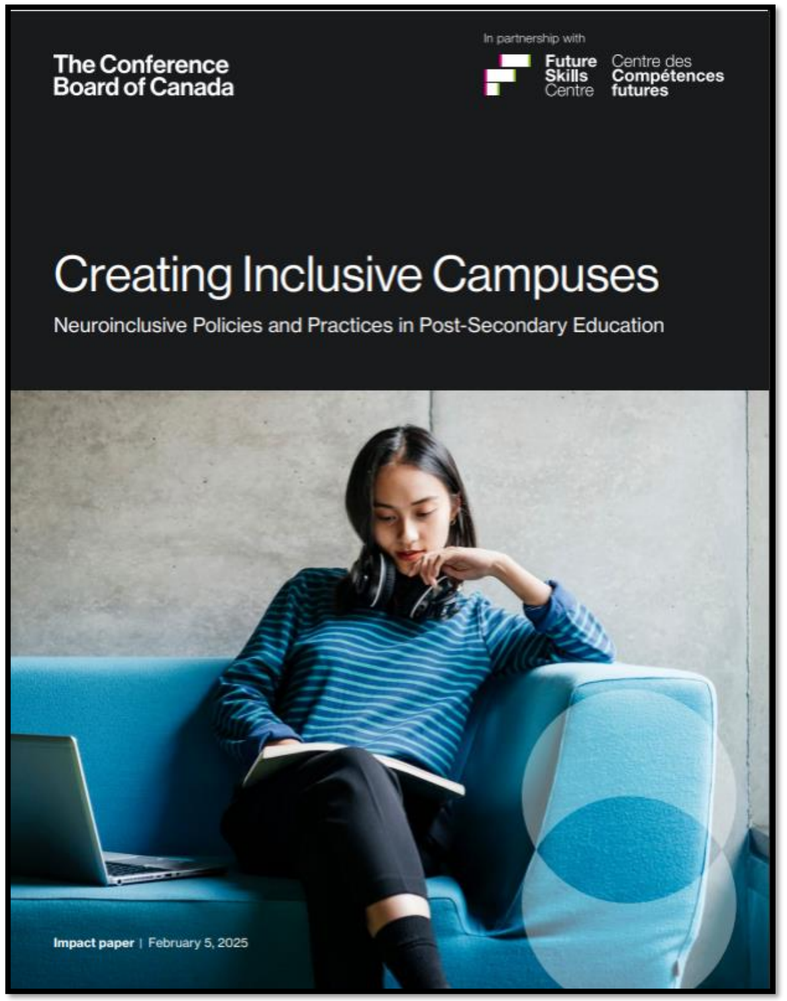
In partnership with Future Skills Centre / Centre des Compétences futures

Making the Invisible Visible

Neurodivergent Students' Experiences in Canadian Higher Education

Issue briefing | November 12, 2024

Research Report: Final Report



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Creating Inclusive Campuses

Neuroinclusive Policies and Practices in Post-Secondary Education

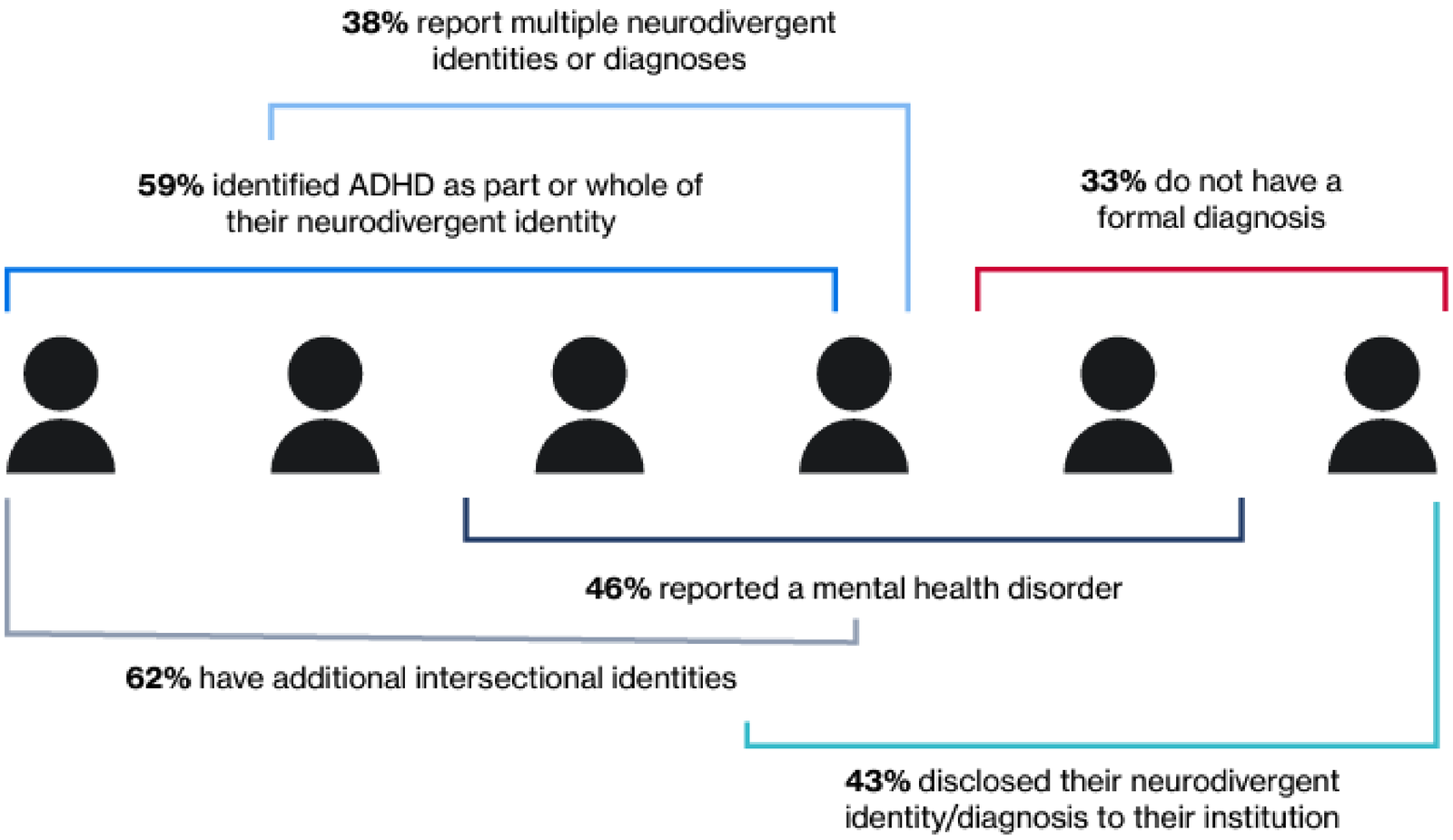
Impact paper | February 5, 2025

Research Study Overview

Literature review	What do we know about neurodivergent student experiences in PSE? What are the gaps?	**Completed:** Dec. 2023
Online survey Neurodivergent students and recent graduates (**n=400**)	What are the barriers and enablers to neurodivergent students' participation and inclusion in PSE?	**Completed:** March 2024
Semi-structured interviews Neurodivergent students and recent graduates (**n=45**) PSI accessibility leadership (**n=17**) PSI accessibility staff (**n=16**)	What practices and policies are in place relating to neurodiversity in Canadian PSIs?	**Completed** June 2024

Exhibit 1

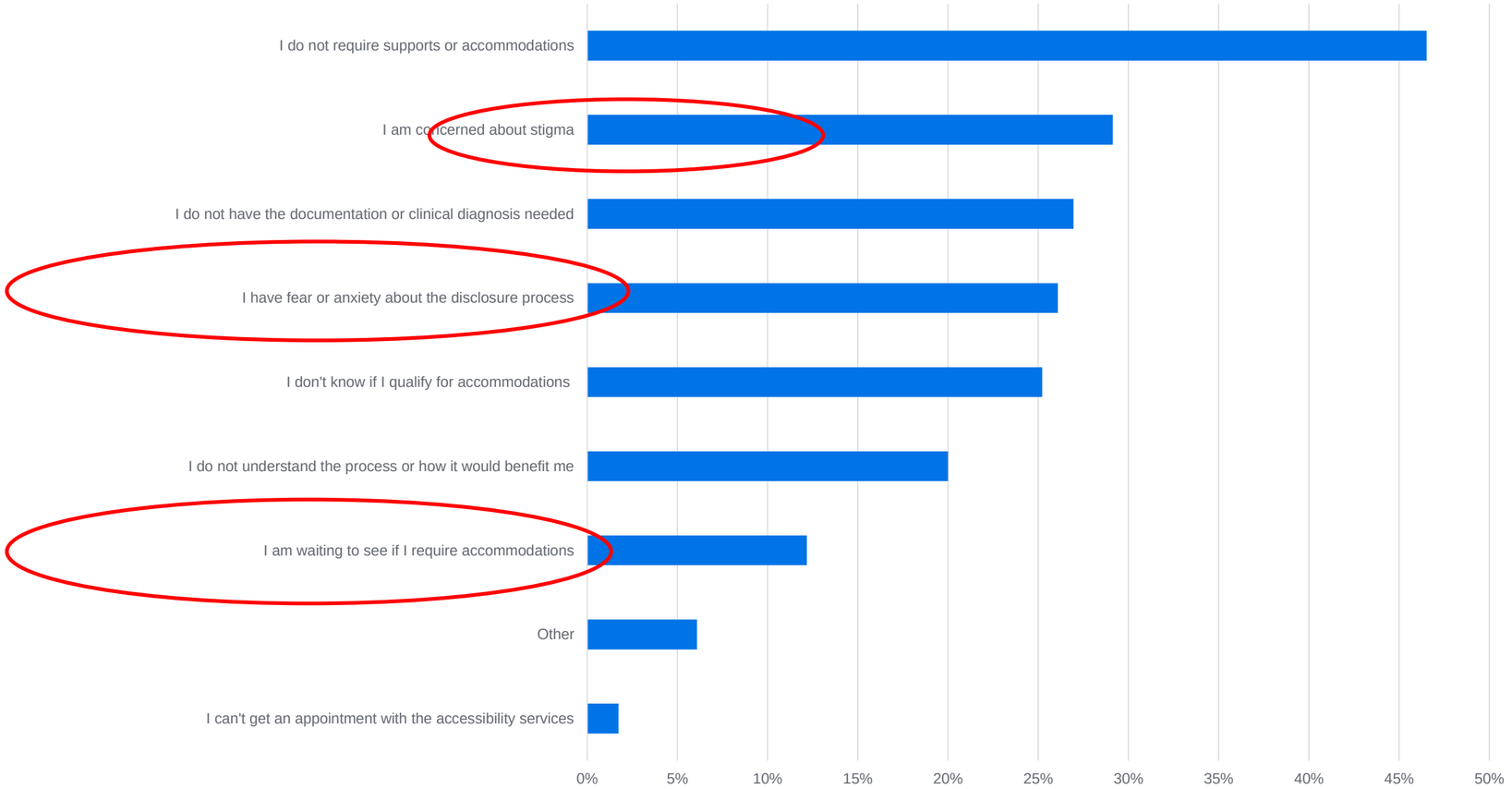
Who are neurodivergent learners?



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Less than half of neurodivergent students choose to disclose their neurodivergent status

Q. Why did you choose not to disclose? Check all that apply:

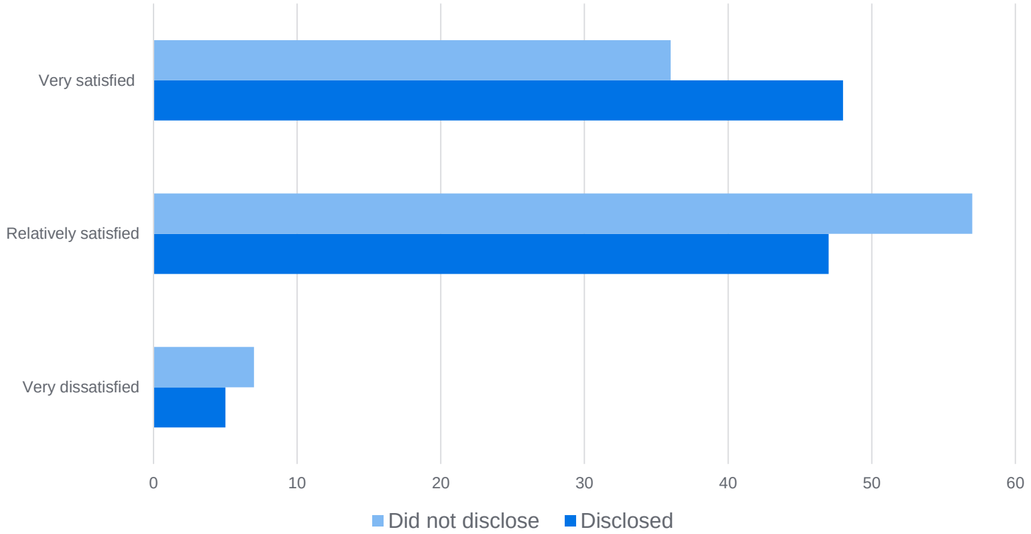


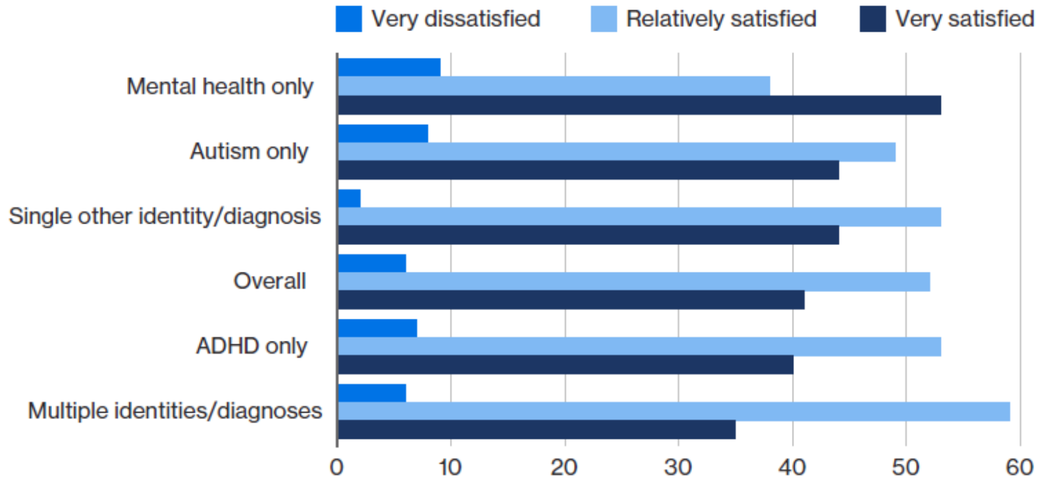
While less than half disclose, 73% of those who did not disclose identified at least one barrier to disclosure

Source: The Conference Board of Canada. n=230

Satisfaction with post-secondary institution by respondent disclosure status

Q: On a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied), indicate your level of overall satisfaction with your post-secondary institution?



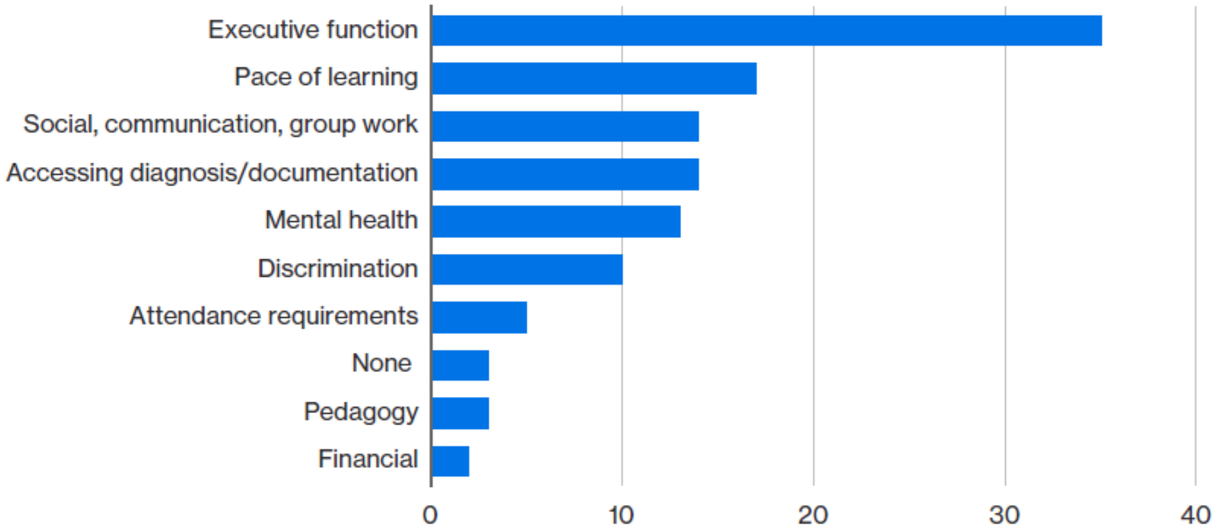


Source: The Conference Board of Canada. N=400. Note: Satisfaction with PSI was assessed on a scale from 1 to 10 and recoded as ‘very dissatisfied’ (scores form 1 to 3), ‘relatively satisfied’ (scored from 4 to 7), and ‘very satisfied’ (scores from 8 to 10)

Barriers to participation

- Executive function challenges reported two to three times more frequently than any other barrier
- Additional barriers included:
  - A lack of information about course or program requirements
    - syllabi availability
    - information about work-integrated learning requirements
  - Lack of flexibility of systems and timelines
    - reduced course load
    - drop/withdrawal dates
  - The built environment
    - lack of safe spaces
    - classroom design challenges
    - location and connectedness of services

Q: In just a few words, what are the biggest barriers (challenges) you've faced as a neurodivergent student in post-secondary education? (thematically coded responses)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada. N=370

Impactful Supports

Students and staff reported the following supports as useful or desirable:

Mental health services
- counselling; clinical assessments; inter-institution referrals

Executive function skill development
- sustaining focus and attention; study skills; organization skills

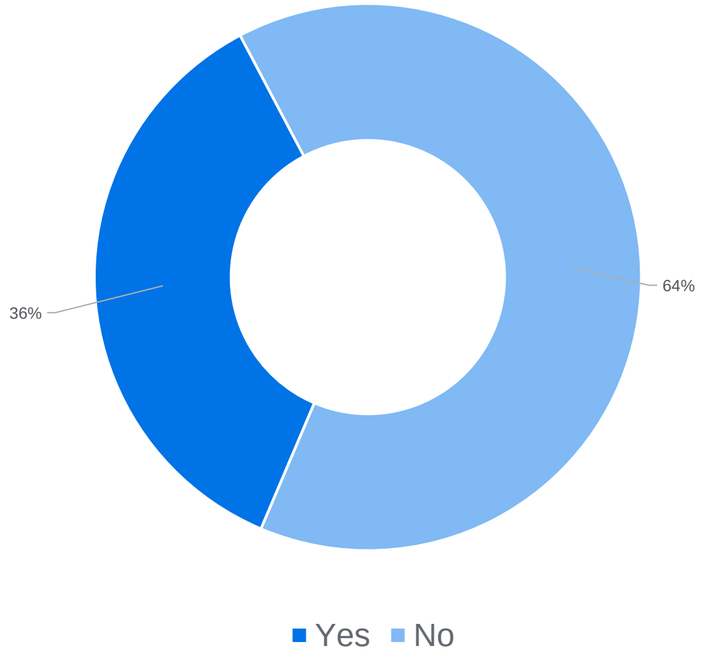
Social groups
- support groups; social opportunities

Mentorship
- peer tutoring; career transition

Assistive technology
- scribe pens
- graphic organizers

Artificial Intelligence
- writing support
- study skills support

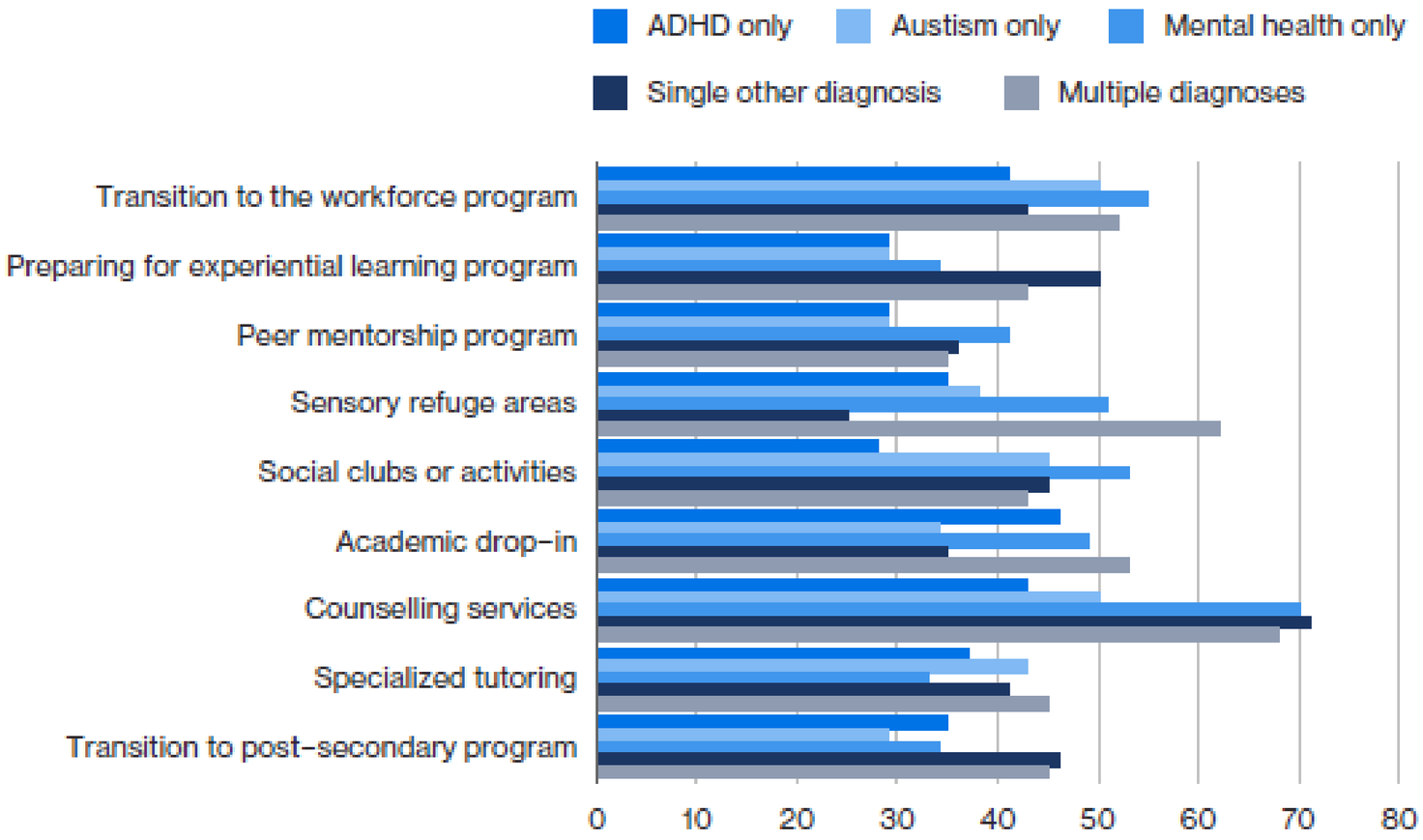
Q: Have you accessed supports or opportunities for neurodivergent students?



Source: The Conference Board of Canada. N=400

60% of students would access counselling services if available

Q: Would you use or participate in the following opportunities for neurodivergent students if they were available at your institution?



Source: The Conference Board of Canada. N=400

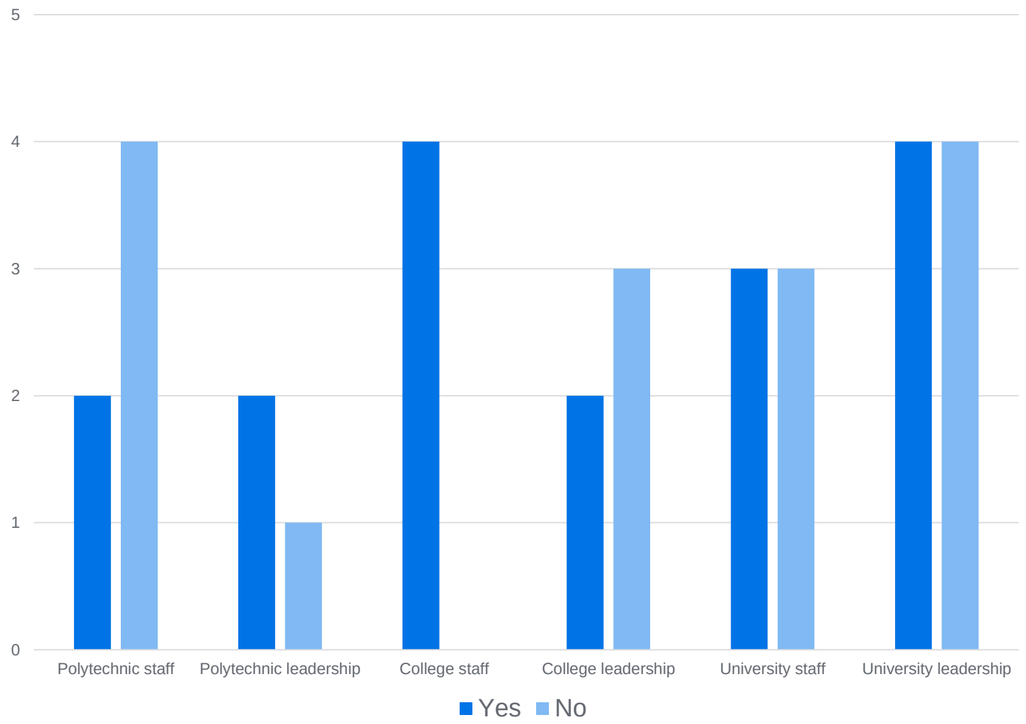
(Re)considering institutional policy

Almost half of PSI staff and leadership participants (47%) reported that neurodiversity was **not** adequately represented in their institution's EDI policy.

Some ways PSIs are engaging with neurodiversity in policy are:

- using inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility (IDEA) language/frameworks rather than EDI
- engaging with lived experiences (staff and students) to inform policy development
- creating new appointments/roles and institutional restructuring to support EDI work

Q: Do you think neurodiversity is adequately considered and represented in your institution's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion strategic planning and policies?



Source: The Conference Board of Canada. n=32

Recommendations for Post-Secondary Institutions

1. Implement mandatory neurodiversity training for all campus employees to address the barriers ND students face and reduce stigma.
2. Adopt a neuroinclusive and neuro-affirming wrap-around service or ‘Hub’ model to offer coordinated support across academic, accessibility, and mental health services.
3. Integrate accessibility into institutional equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) strategic planning and policy development. Set measurable outcomes to track progress and ensure accountability.
4. Provide ND students with information relevant to their learning profiles and types of supports and services that support with their functional needs and develop their self-advocacy skills
5. Create channels and opportunities for neurodivergent students, staff, and faculty to contribute to EDI and accessibility policies.

Questions

Making the Invisible Visible by Dr. Jennifer Fane

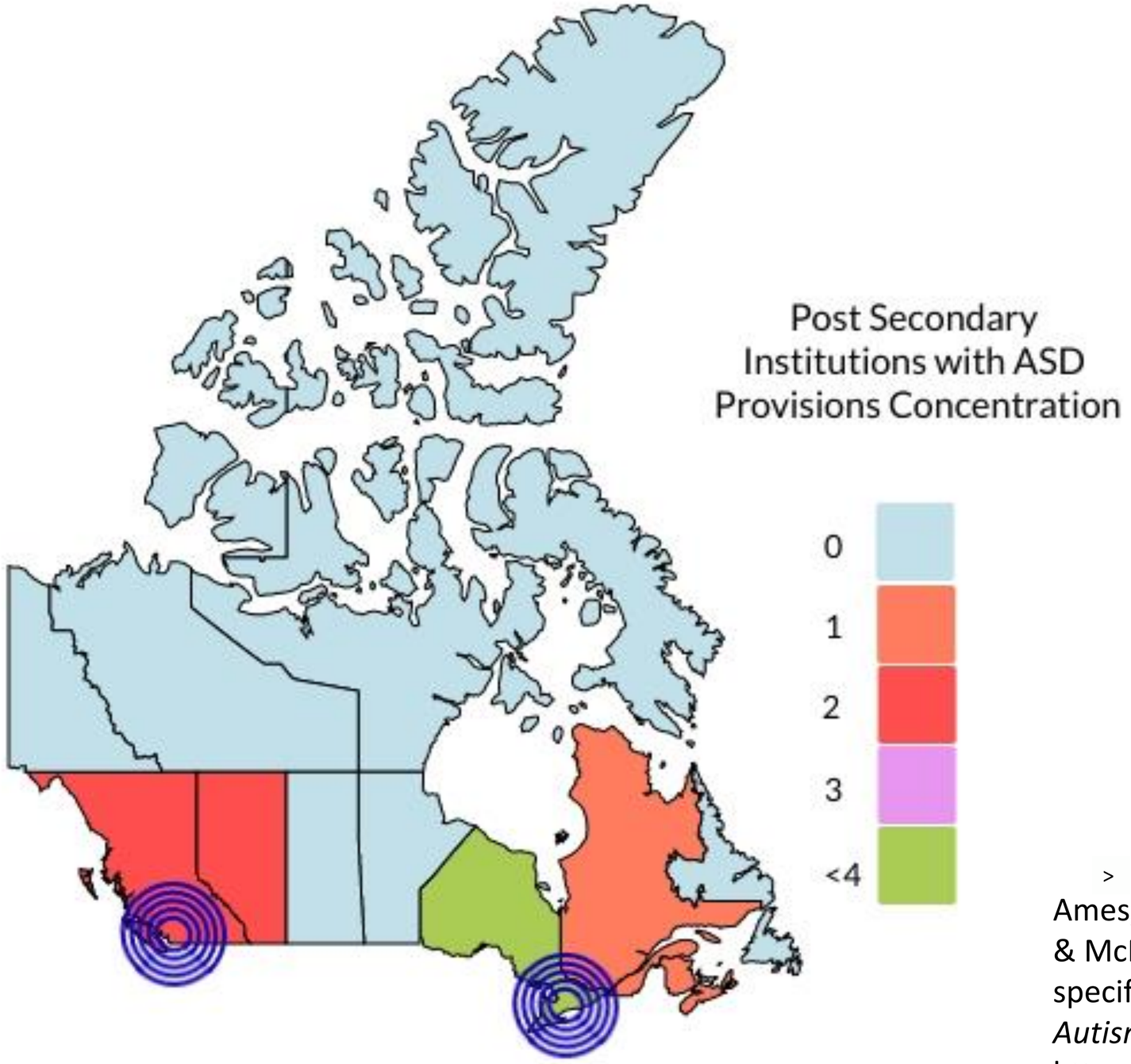
Autism in Higher Education

Dr. Megan Ames, R. Psych.

Tuesday, February 11, 2025

BC Campus Panel

mames@uvic.ca



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Ames, M. E., Coombs, C. E. M., Duerksen, K. N., Vincent, J., & McMorris, C. N. (2022). Canadian mapping of autism-specific supports for postsecondary students. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 90. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2021.101899

Coombs, C. E. M., Vincent, J., & McMorris, C. N., & Ames, M. E., (2023). Barriers and facilitators to supporting Canadian autistic postsecondary students: Experiences of accessible learning staff and administrators. *Research on Autism Spectrum Disorders.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2023.102260

Ames, M. E., Sihoe, C. E., Coombs, E. C., Foreman, S., Punt, K., Singh, V., Stack, T., & McMorris, C. A. (revised). Experiences of autistic students in postsecondary education: A review of review *Autism in Adulthood.*

Thank you!

Dr. Megan Ames, R. Psych.

https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/ames/

https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/ames/autistic-student-resources/

Email: mames@uvic.ca

Questions

Peer Mentorship Models by Dr. Megan Ames

addl
Autism & Developmental Disabilities Lab

AEL
Autism in Education Lab

Autism Mentorship Initiative (AMI): Enhancing University Success

Elina Birmingham, PhD, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education

Grace Iarocci, PhD, RPsych, Professor, Department of Psychology

SFU

Challenges adjusting to university

- **Growing population of autistic students in university**
  - unmet needs and low graduation rates (Cage et al., 2020)
- **Fewer supports services than in K-12 settings**
  - Accommodations focus on learning and physical disabilities
- **Autism-specific problems often go un-addressed**
  - planning & organization
  - sensory sensitivities
  - adjusting to new routines
  - independent living skills (meal preparation, hygiene)
  - social/communication difficulties
  - mental health

AMI Overview

- **Founded in 2013**
  - Collaboration between Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL), Psychology and Education

- **Purpose**: free 1-on-1 mentorship for autistic undergraduates

- **Mentors**: upper-level undergraduates or graduate students

AMI Goals

1. To provide support in a safe, caring, respectful environment
2. To share knowledge, experiences, and resources to enhance the mentees' engagement in university
3. To enhance academic success and mentee retention
4. To provide opportunities for personal growth and independence for mentees and mentors
5. To promote inclusivity within the university community
6. To conduct research to inform best practices

AMI Components

- Mentor **training** on autism and neurodiversity
- **Matching** between mentors and mentees
- Monthly **supervision** meetings
- One **social event** per semester
- Mentors submit **progress reports** each month
- **Research**

Recent study (Trevisan, Leach, Iarocci & Birmingham 2021)

- Participants: Mentees (n=19; 14M, 5F) and Mentors (n=21; 5M, 16F)
- Evaluation Tools:
  - Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (T1, T2)
  - GPA (T1, T3)
  - Program evaluation survey (T2)

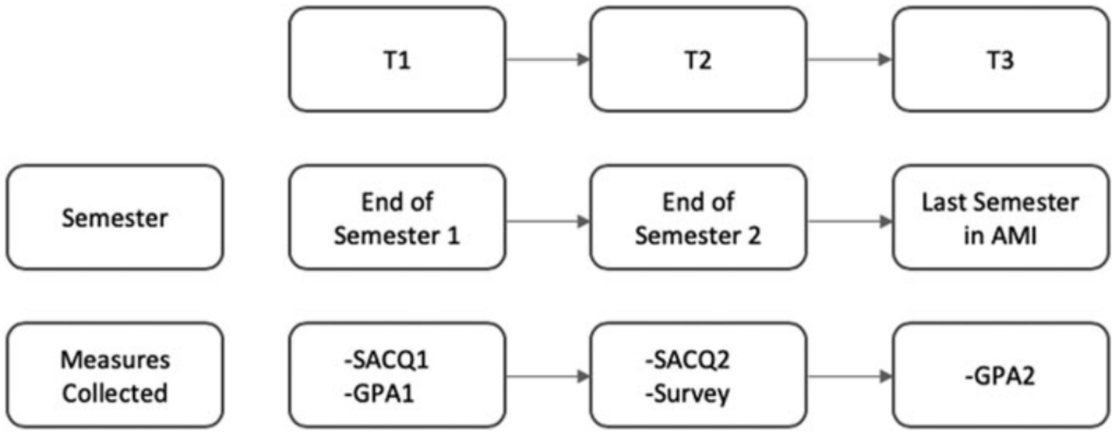


FIG. 1. Timeline of data collection. AMI, Autism Mentorship Initiative; GPA, grade point average; SACQ, Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire.

Findings - College Adjustment and GPA

- Mentees' initial adjustment lower than neurotypical norms
- Notable gains in social, emotional, and academic adjustment through AMI
  - all gains were statistically significant (ps < 0.05), except for academic adjustment (p= 0.085)
- No significant improvements in academic GPA

Survey Insights

- Personal, academic, and professional benefits reported by mentors and mentees

Aspect	Percentage (%)
Satisfaction with joining AMI	100
Likelihood of continuing for another year	87.5
Adjustment to college	68.75
Personal growth and increased independence	87.5
Help with socialization and meeting others	50
Help with anxiety	37.5

Mentee quotes

- *“The support AMI provided me helped me in many ways transitioning into post-secondary life. My mentor was there through all the rough times these past 7 months in university.’’*

- *“[My mentor helped me find] rooms for classes, being a confidante for me, sharing their struggles through her first year to help me emotionally with the transition.’’*

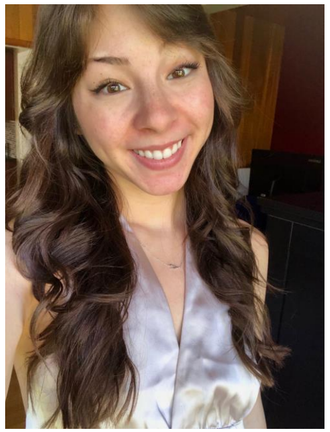
- *“My mentor gave me advice regarding a variety of different aspects of life: school, social relationships, family relationships, faith, mental health, life skills, and even romantic relationships.’’*

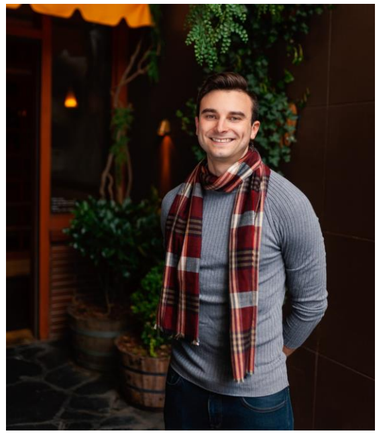
Discussion and Recent Changes

- Preliminary evidence of AMI's benefits
- AMI is a cost-effective and easy-to-implement program
- Limitation of the study was absence of control group

- Updated mentor training
  - strong focus on neurodiversity, social model of disability
- Budget cuts at SFU have forced CAL to pause AMI
- Re-modeling the program

Thank you





Questions

SFU Autism Mentorship Initiative by
Drs. Elina Birmingham & Grace Iarocci

SCHOOL OF ACCESS
& ACADEMIC PREPARATION
CAPILANO UNIVERSITY

Access Programs

Alison Hale, Instructor
Kathy Moscrip, Instructor

February 10, 2025

CAPILANO UNIVERSITY

Access Programs

Two programs offered

- Discover Employability
- Education and Employment Access

Tuition and fee bearing

- Funding available dependent on financial need

Full time certificate programs

Nontransferable credits

Education and Employment Access Certificate

- Full time September to April
- 14 student cohort
- Dogwood or Evergreen
- Reading and writing comprehension assessed at intake
- University schedule where class times and building locations vary
- Students may have strong academic skills
- Learn expectations of university and employment
- Customized 6 week practicum in spring term

Highlights-Transitions

Transition Week:

- Library and social spaces tours
- Conflict resolution workshop
- Guest speakers
- Participating in campus events
- Disclosure beyond Accessibilities

Executive Functioning Practice:

- Changing classrooms/labs
- Tracking assignments
  - Paper
  - Technology
- Instructor communication
- Using office hours
- Accessing campus resources

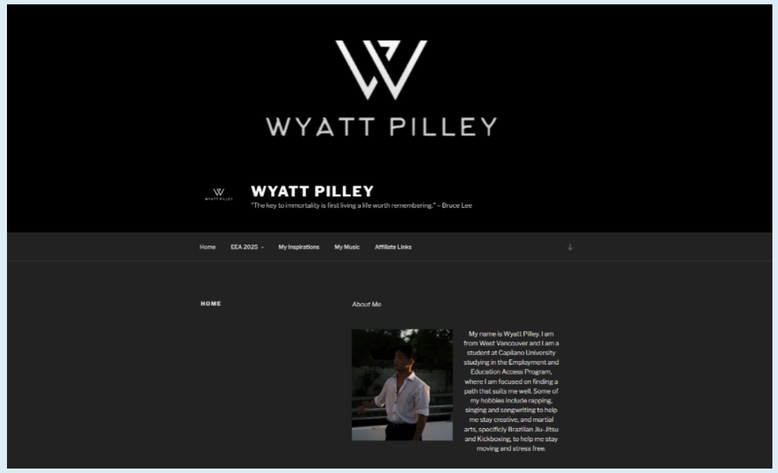
Highlights - Classroom

Universal Design for Learning.
Multiple means of:

- Representation
  - Text available in multiple modes
  - Visual and physical examples of information
- Action and Expression
  - Written and or computer
  - Small group learning and creative ways to express learning
- Engagement
  - Individual choice re presentations, assignments
  - Moving around during class

E-portfolios:

- Opportunity to represent accomplishments in a more dynamic way
- Presenting to professionals/industry experts
- Building technical skills



Highlights-Practicum

Students participate in selecting a practicum site; what are their interests, goals, experience and capacity? Employer sites are chosen based on the self assessments and exploration the students have completed in fall term.

- Exposure to areas of interest
- Formal experience for pre-requisites
- Skills development
- Connections and references

Highlights - Mentoring

- Support for social inclusion
- Participation in campus activities/student life
  - Holiday events
  - Wellness events
  - Sports
  - Theatre
  - Clubs
- Support in communicating with instructors, assignment deadlines
- Experience a first-year class

Where do our EEA grads go next?

- Carry on in courses in Upgrading to complete pre-requisites
- Accepted directly into first year courses at Cap U such as ECCE, Arts and Sciences, Accounting Assistant, Health Care Assistant
- Take courses at other institutions (BCIT, UBC, Douglas)
- Hired by practicum host
- Register with employment services to find paid work

Challenges

Independence:

- Dependence on EAs in high school
- Students rely on a support model in high school that no longer exists
- Advocates accustomed to active involvement in student education

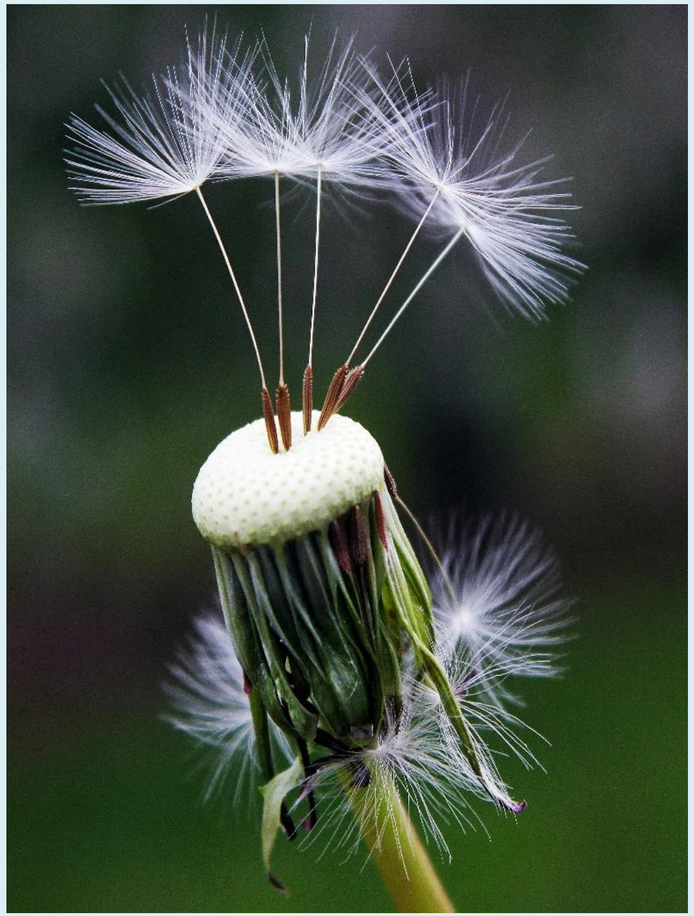
Case Management

- Increased 30%
- Mental health support outside of university
- Referrals to outside agencies
- Liaison with other professionals supporting students

Funding

- Small class size is incongruent with post-secondary funding model
- Minimal learning support
- Limited pathways upon graduation

Wishes for Post-Secondary



- Educational Assistants for post-secondary students as they carry on in courses/programs

Recognition of more diverse supports through Accessibilities

Specialized counselling support

Universal Design for Learning throughout campus

Generalized learning labs

Thank you!

Questions

Access Programs at Capilano University by
Alison Hale & Kathy Moscrip

BCcampus
Learning. Doing. Leading.

Questions?

BCcampus
Learning. Doing. Leading.

Thank you!

Please complete the feedback survey.
Your input is valuable.