



SESSION IV: Education beyond school - transition to college and university for autistic students

Bradley Cox, PhD; Jiedi Lei, M.Sc., Brett Nachman, M.S.

July 2, 2020 // 2:00 pm EDT

Course Materials

The purpose of these materials is to help provide an introduction to the INSAR Institute session on education beyond school, including transitions to college and university for autistic students. The materials were designed to provide trainees who are unfamiliar with this research with the general background to get the most educational benefit from the session. Toward this objective, we have prepared the following: (1) learning objectives for this session; (2) some key terms and concepts; (3) a selection of recommended resources. These materials are intended to supplement the webinar while providing direction for further engagement with the topic.

In collaboration with Dr. Cox, Ms. Lei and Mr. Nachman, these materials were developed by **Marika Coffman, Ph.D.** (Postdoctoral Clinical Research Fellow at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center; marika@vt.edu) **Michal Cook, M.S.W.** (doctoral student at the University of North Carolina; michal.cook@unc.edu), **Fathima Kodakkadan, M.S.** (doctoral student at Anglia Ruskin University; fathima.kodakkadan@pgr.anglia.ac.uk). Feel free to contact us with

questions/comments. Register for this course and other sessions in this series at <https://www.autism-insar.org/general/custom.asp?page=SLanding>.

Learning Objectives

The INSAR Institute for Autism Research was established in direct response to requests from early career researchers (graduate students, postdocs, etc.), with training opportunities in multidisciplinary areas. The INSAR Institute team is now working to engage stakeholders as well. INSAR Institute priorities are to provide: (1) freely available; (2) multidisciplinary training platform for young scientists and others from various backgrounds that (3) allows for international participation. The INSAR Institute covers broad topics and is meant for people who are not expert in the topic area. It is offered over a free web platform, and it allows researchers from around the world to connect with the presenter(s). The overarching goal of the INSAR Institute is to expose junior scientists to topics they are not currently engaged in, with the hope that basic scientists and clinical scientists may learn from each other to ultimately advance the understanding of autism.

The current session, Education Beyond School - Transition to College and University for Autistic Students, is led by Dr. Cox, Ms. Lei, and Mr. Nachman and a team of trainees who worked in tandem to prepare these materials and the web presentation. *Over the course of the presentation, participants will be able to:*

1. **Contextualize** attendance and retention statistics amongst autistic college students
2. **Appreciate** individual differences in diagnosis disclosure that may cause under-estimation of prevalence rates
3. **Identify** the multiple domains of college life that affect student outcomes (and which may affect and/or be affected by autism)
4. **Recognize** that students are capable of success in all degree fields/majors, but institutions should examine ways to develop personally-adaptive approaches to serve autistic students
5. **Understand** social network changes across the first-year of university, and shared and unique factors that influence transition outcomes for autistic students relative to neurotypical peers
6. **Explore** mechanisms for translating emerging research into actionable insights that inform policy and/or practice

Key Terms

Comorbidity: True comorbidity is when there are two separable conditions that co-occur in the same individual. Comorbidity can be related to:

- Shared or associated environmental or biological risk factors;
- A unique syndrome with potentially different etiology, and outcome than either disorder in its 'pure' form;
- The case in which one disorder increases the risk of developing the second disorder

Educational terms

- **Higher education:** terms are often culturally specific, this presentation will typically refer to tertiary education beyond a high school or equivalent level, including
 - **University or college:** four year programs
 - **Community college:** typically US-based 2-year postsecondary programs
- **Course instructors:** typically refers to person teaching a course or class
 - USA: Faculty member, professor
 - UK: Lecturers (UK)
- **Outcomes** or definition of education success:
 - US: Retention, grade point average
 - UK: Class honours

Executive functioning: A set of skills that enable us to achieve goals, solve problems, and regulate our behavior.

Perceived Social Support: An individual's subjective experience of tangible (e.g., practical/informational) and less tangible (e.g., emotional/social) support provided by different network members.

Self determination: Self determination refers to the skills that promote autonomy and independence for individuals with autism, including choice making, goal setting, problem-solving, self-monitoring, and self-advocating.

Self advocacy Self-advocacy refers to the skills of people from within a specific group to integrate knowledge about their civil rights, relevant laws, and their relative adaptive strengths and weaknesses to effectively communicate their perspectives and needs to the overall community (on an individual level to broader social systems).

Social anxiety: Social anxiety is a chronic mental health condition in which social interactions cause significant discomfort including fear, self-consciousness, and embarrassment.

Social network: Social network structure includes a range of quantifiable metrics such as size (how many people an individual is in contact with and consider close to them), density (to what extent do different network members know and are in contact with each other), and network composition (relative percentage of family, friends and other network members).

Transition planning: Transition planning is the process of identifying goals and providing necessary skills to smoothly transition to adult life, including independence in a post-secondary program.

Use of language

- **Person-First language:** Person-first language is a method of referring to individuals with disabilities, medical conditions, or functional impairments that emphasizes the person over their disability, condition, or impairment. The term "a child with autism"

would be consistent with person-first language, whereas the term “an autistic child” would not.

- **Identity-first language:** Identity-first language is the opposite of person-first language. Saying "Autistic person" rather than "person with Autism" is using identity-first language.
- **Neurotypical:** Description of a medically and psychologically healthy individual demonstrating a normative pattern of neurodevelopment. Typically used specifically in contrast with individuals experiencing an atypical developmental course, such as autism, and often used to describe the control group in clinical research.

Recommended Readings & Resources

JOURNAL ARTICLES

TRANSITIONS INTO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Alverson, C. Y., Lindstrom, L. E., & Hirano, K. A. (2019). High school to college: Transition experiences of young adults with autism. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 34(1), 52–64. [doi: 10.1177/1088357615611880](https://doi.org/10.1177/1088357615611880)

Hotez, E., Shane-Simpson, C., Obeid, R., DeNigris, D., Siller, M., Costikas, C., ... Gillespie-Lynch, K. (2018). Designing a summer transition program for incoming and current college students on the Autism Spectrum: A participatory approach. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9. [doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00046](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00046)

Lei, J., Ashwin, C., Brosnan, M., & Russell, A. (2019a). Developing an Online Tool to Measure Social Network Structure and Perceived Social Support Amongst Autistic Students in Higher Education: A Feasibility Study. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-04070-5>

Lei, J., Brosnan, M., Ashwin, C., & Russell, A. (2020). Evaluating the role of autistic traits, social anxiety, and social network changes during transition to first year of university in typically developing students and students on the Autism Spectrum. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04391-w>

Nachman, B. R. (2020). Enhancing transition programming for college students with autism: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 33(1), 81-95.

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION EXPERIENCES

Cox, B. E., Nachman, B. R., Thompson, K., Dawson, S., Edelstein, J., & Breeden, C. (In Press). An Exploration of Actionable Insights Regarding College Students with Autism: A Review of the Literature. *Review of Higher Education*.

Cox, B. E., Thompson, K., Anderson, A., Mintz, A., Locks, T., Morgan, L., ... Wolz, A. (2017). College experiences for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Personal identity, public disclosure, and institutional support. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(1), 71–87. [doi: 10.1353/csd.2017.0004](https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2017.0004)

Gelbar, N. W., Smith, I., Reichow, B. (2014). Systematic review of articles describing experiences and supports of individuals with autism enrolled in college and university programs. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 44(10), 2593-2601. doi.org/10.1007/s10803-014-2135-5

Miller, R. A., Nachman, B. R., & Wynn, R. D. (2020). "I feel like they are all interconnected": Understanding the identity management of autistic LGBTQ college students. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 38(1), 1-15.

Van Hees, V., Moyson, T., Roeyers, H. (2015) Higher education experiences of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Challenges, benefits, and support needs. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 45(6), 1673-1688. doi.org/10.1007/s10803-014-2324-2

MISCELLANEOUS ARTICLES

Gelbar, N. W., Shefcyk, A., & Reichow, B. (2015). A comprehensive survey of current and former college students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*, 88, 45-68.

Nachman, B. R., & Brown, K. R. (2020). Omission and othering: Constructing autism on community college websites. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 44(3), 211-223.

Vincent, J. (2019). It's the fear of the unknown: Transition from higher education for young autistic adults. *Autism*, 23(6), 1575–1585. [doi: 10.1177/1362361318822498](https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318822498)

White, D., Hillier, A., Frye, A., & Makrez, E. (2016). College students' knowledge and attitudes towards students on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 43, 1–7.

MEDIA

- [Autism Goes to College](#) (documentary)
- [Atypical](#) (Netflix series)
- [Jane Thierfeld Brown lecture on college students on the autism spectrum](#) (YouTube video)
- [The College Autism Network: Why It Exists and How It Works](#) (NASPA-produced YouTube video)

NEWS ARTICLES

- [Hechinger Report piece on college autism support programs](#)
- [Inside Higher Ed piece on Autism and Title IX](#)
- [Inside Higher Ed piece on neurodiverse students navigating the pandemic](#)

ONLINE RESOURCES

- [Best Colleges for Students with Autism](#)
- [College Autism Network](#)