An Expert Discussion on Autism in Postsecondary Education and the "Empowering Engines" Who Do Good

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Introduction

Postsecondary education is a changing and challenging context for the scores of autistic students who pass through these spaces. One decade ago, Dr. Edlyn Peña chronicled the absence of disabilities scholarship in higher education literature, even while concurrently an influx of autistic learners entered our college campuses.[1] Concurrently, the advent of the College Autism Network, the non-profit organization founded by Dr. Bradley E. Cox, started to gather individuals connected to autism in higher education, in the hopes of better supporting autistic college students across transition points.[2] In the years since, postsecondary education constituents worldwide have reconciled how to adjust their structures and spaces to elevate autistic values and strengths, much as researchers have tirelessly aimed to thoughtfully and robustly curate autistic college students' perspectives in their studies.[3-10]

In this roundtable, we assemble individuals immersed in work to best serve autistic college students' experiences. These panelists suggest that in seizing the opportunity to transform the landscape we can also bolster community.

Dr. Brett Ranon Nachman: ***First, I want to welcome all six of you panelists who have a range of experiences in post-secondary education and connections to the autism community as it pertains to the college stage. We're going to cover a lot of ground today, and I'm going to ask that each of you provide introductions in alphabetical order.***

Emily Coombs: My name is Emily Coombs. I am an autistic PhD student and a provisional psychologist at the University of Alberta. I have been involved in various early investigations of autistic experiences in post-secondary education in Canada specifically, so I think I'm the Canadian representation for today. I am now specifically and fully under Dr. Brown for my PhD supervision where I support and I lead various initiatives pertaining to her inter-institutional collaboration and study called Campus Belonging.

Dr. Bradley E. Cox: Hello, I'm Dr. Bradley E. Cox. I'm an associate professor at Michigan State University and I'm also the founder of the nonprofit College Autism Network, which seeks to operationalize and act on much of the research being done by folks like those on this panel here. I started paying attention to autism research when my son was diagnosed 10 years ago. And then I've continued the work and have enjoyed focusing on autistic students specifically in their transition into through and out of higher education.

Janelle Johnson: Hi, I am Janelle Johnson, a doctoral candidate in educational psychology at NC State University. I identify as a Black autistic disabled woman, and I'm also the parent of an autistic child, so he's 10 and delightful. And then I'm a family therapist and I've been working with neurodivergent families for 13 years. In my own personal research, I'm focused on lived experience of neurodivergent BIPOC students and stakeholders at research universities. And I'm really interested in understanding neuro-affirming participatory research methods that can advance institutional policy change and practice in education and healthcare.

Dr. Baiyina Muhammad: I am Dr. Baiyina Muhammad. My professional roles are many. I'm an associate professor of history at North Carolina Central University, which is one of six Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the state of North Carolina. At NCCU I teach courses on gender, race, and disability history, and I serve on an advisory board for North Carolina Central University students with disabilities through the Office of Student Accessibility Services. I am also the executive director and founder of the North Carolina Black Disabilities Network, which is a newly established nonprofit that works to amplify the voices of Black disabled community members and their caregivers. I'm also a neurodivergent mother of four sons, two of whom have autism and other co-occurring conditions.

Dr. Edlyn Peña: Hi. I'm Dr. Edlyn Peña. I am a professor at California Lutheran University and the director of the Educational Leadership doctoral program. In addition to that, I am the co-founder and director of the Autism and Communication Center at Cal Lutheran. In particularly, we focus on supporting students through the higher education transition process and supporting college students. We also focus on supporting non-speaking, minimally speaking students who use augmentative alternative communication. I am a mom to an autistic 17-year-old son who is non-speaking. My line of work is really working on the Autism and Communication Center with research around transition to post-secondary or higher education and supporting the inclusion of minimally speaking autistic students in education. And I am a new chief executive officer for a community center that I am creating and it's opening this June 2025 called the Dream Community Center.

Dr. Jonathan Vincent: Hello everyone. My name is Dr. Jonathan Vincent. I'm an assistant professor or a lecturer, as we say in the UK, in the Educational Research Department at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom. I'm also a coach for autistic people making the transition into university and often into work as well. I've been researching with autistic people and neurodivergent students and graduates around their experiences of higher education since about 2012, 2013. But over the last decade or so, my research has really focused primarily on the transitions out of higher education for this group. And I'm the parent of an autistic child as well.

Dr. Brett Ranon Nachman: ***What would you say are the emergent trends that have surfaced in the research literature regarding what we know about autistic college students?***

Emily Coombs: There is not a lot, but there is emerging research on the intersection of autism, gender, and sexuality in universities. I know people on the call have all contributed to literature regarding that. We are seeing trends of one in seven autistic women and one in 20 autistic men are identifying as LGBTQ+. Plus, we know that autistic individuals are coming into universities. So how does that look? That is such an interesting subgroup of autistic individuals in higher education. And something that came across in 2024 was the Soto and colleagues study where they had this massive US sample and they were able to identify that 45% of the autistic sample identified as LGBTQ+ or gender divergent.[9] And that to me is just like, "Holy! Wow!". And to add to that, a lot of the qualitative data that is coming, there's a case study as well as that we're seeing this distinct multi-marginalized group having higher reported adverse stress, negative academic outcomes and mental health outcomes even compared to their non-gender and sexually diverse counterparts. So in my master's work, I actually cited a university-based study. It was the Miller et al. (2020) study titled, 'I feel like they're all interconnected.'[10] And that was really, really important. I wasn't focusing on university experiences, I was actually focusing on AFAB, sexually diverse, individual autistic individuals. But there was something that stuck to me and it's that not feeling accepted in queer spaces or in autistic spaces and this need for intersectional considerations as well as this kind of like what's the institutional support for diverse needs and is that a responsibility or the right thing to do? So that I feel like it is just a very interesting but also niche emerging research.

Dr. Bradley E. Cox: Emily, I'll say that I'm not sure. It's quite so niche. The PEACES project that Brett and I have been running for the last few years, I have repeatedly had to go back and double check our data. "Is it really that high for our non-binary or gender queer sample?" And any one of the ways in which we might have one identify as part of the queer spectrum. And our numbers are in line with what you had just referenced that 40% plus and in some cases very much beyond that. So I think we really cannot afford, if we have thus far, ignore that as an intersecting identity because to do so really undermines our ability to address important parts of students' lives beyond just their autistic identity.

Dr. Brett Ranon Nachman: ***I think has always existed and per this more recent scholarship is illustrating that it's so prominent and it's very much a core component of so many folks' experiences.***

Emily Coombs: When we think about emerging literature, in Canada specifically, is showing that there's about 6,000 to 10,000 autistic students. When we think about 45% of that group, that's a large group of individuals who are multi-minoritized, just when you just consider sexuality and gender, that's not to talk about their racialized experiences. They're going to be triple minoritized when we add in that lens as well. So that's a big group of autistic individuals that we have to consider.

Dr. Edlyn Peña: I wanted to build onto this sort of the broader conversation about intersectionality, and I think I can get it started, but I know there are folks in this room who can definitely push that conversation forward with the current work they're doing. But I started doing this work in 2012, I would say around that time. And my first study, I couldn't figure out how to access autistic college students because I didn't have a relationship with them at the time, so it was very difficult for me to even recruit folks to interview. So I ended up changing my study and reaching out to parents and we were able to interview nearly 40 parents to talk about how they helped their autistic students transition into community colleges, four-year colleges. But what I found in doing that study is out of the nearly 40 participants, we had under 10%, a small number, it was a couple of families who were actually ethnic minority or BIPOC families. And at that time, that was really stunning to me and I didn't have a lot to share in terms of data because it was just the fact that that happened. But the fact that we don't have enough racially minoritized folks on the spectrum accessing college is an issue. And then there's a whole conversation about, well, going back to who is getting diagnosed, when are they getting diagnosed and who's accessing resources, and then the whole trajectory of that. So I'm excited to see that now we're seeing more research and publications on the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, disability in literature where I hadn't really seen that even five years ago.

Janelle Johnson: I'll hop in there. When I was thinking about this question, this is where I landed. So the exact thing that you said, Dr. Brad, is what we are seeing in the research is at least the acknowledgement that. What we have seen consistently over the last couple of years is this call that this diversity is missing. And particularly researchers continue to recognize that and highlight that lack of diversity as a limitation of their study. We recognize that it's not that Black and brown autistic students aren't there, it's that they may not be diagnosed yet. In thinking about how to make some changes in autism research and post-secondary settings, how we can capture different folks, how can get better samples is important.

Dr. Brett Ranon Nachman: ***How do your identities and connections to autism influence the ways in which you engage in this work involving autism in higher education and specifically autistic college students?***

Dr. Edlyn Peña: As a parent of a non-speaking autistic child, I've had the fortune of having that experience guide my work and not only doing my scholarship and research around including minimally speaking and non-speaking autistics as co-authors as participants, but also in co-creating a college bound academy where we set up a three-day program for folks who use augmentative alternative communication to prepare them for college and then have peer mentors who are non-speaking or minimally speaking be a part of that process. So I've really been guided by work and making sure that we're preparing institutions for college students who do need extra supports with their communication, with sensory needs, with bringing a communication partner with them to class, which is new for many faculty. So that has been a key aspect. And then the second part I just want to say is that as a parent, one of the studies that I did with a doctoral student on teaching students on the spectrum found that folks or faculty members who were family members or had a close connection to an autistic student or child or college student, really created this foundation of care, ethic of care, believing in students, giving them a chance, having high expectations, but also high levels of support and providing these accommodations that are necessary.

Dr. Baiyina Muhammad: Yeah, I would add that in my own experience, raising two Black autistic sons has certainly made me keenly aware of the dual challenges of being both black and disabled. And in my years of experience navigating systems that were not designed to serve the needs of my children based on their disability and their blackness, including both K12 education as well as post-secondary education. I find that the connection I have with the autism community and larger disability community certainly makes me more attuned to the importance of creating inclusive environments and using my connection to have impact on how we engage autistic students on my particular campus, which is an HBCU and in our larger community.

Emily Coombs: Just to riff off what was said, I think I want to note is that the post-secondary institutions are sometimes inherently erasure institutions. So when I think about my own identity, there's parts of it that are erased in participating in institutions. So when I reflect upon my work, it is imperative that my work reflects the identities of my participants that are engaging with that work. I'm often kind of tiffed when I see a study be like, oh, and we lumped all the racial identities together, or we've lumped all Black and Indigenous together. Or we didn't ask specifically about what made up the LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) or we didn't ask specifically about what gender identities. And that I think is erasure at the end of the day. Some institutions, when they pull their demographics, they sometimes engage in erasure there. When some studies do their demographics, they erase identities. And I have fully committed to giving as much opportunity for my autistic participants in my studies to identify how they identify and then reporting that, because if we don't let them have space, and I mean the collective them, to have space to say who they are, we are participating in erasure.

Dr. Brett Ranon Nachman: ***As folks feel comfortable in sharing about how that influences their perspectives in engaging in this work, not unlike what you were just saying, Emily, in terms of your important role, do folks have any further thoughts about that and how you can help change the narrative?***

Janelle Johnson: I think one of the reasons that I love participating in conversations like this and get invited to do so is because there are not a whole lot of Black autistic researchers that are out there. It's not that we don't exist, it's just that we're not out autistic researchers in general, but there are some of us that are. And for me, even choosing to pursue this work and do the research that I'm doing with Dr. Pearson and in my own dissertation research, it has everything to do with who I am, and how I am, and how I exist in the world, as well as preparing a different world for my son as he ages and he prepares to be ready to transition into higher ed later on. Now, I know that it’s not uncommon for autistic folks arriving at especially larger universities, but I had a really rough time. And so now all the work that I'm doing is about, creating an opportunity for students and stakeholders in higher ed to make something different. What happens when we think radically about what higher ed can be, what research can be from the perspectives of multiply marginalized autistic folk? So in the autistic community and the disability community, and even in the Black community, we share this clarion call of “nothing about us without us.” And so with that, I find myself asking different questions to challenge neurotypical hegemony. That's what I'm always looking to do as an equity scholar. So I'm asking questions like, “how do we prepare neurodivergent students for faculty and administrative leadership positions?” as opposed to “how do we help neurodivergent and autistic students get into college? “Are we thinking beyond that?

Dr. Bradley E. Cox: Janelle, you touched on so many things that I want to touch on as well. I'll try to go in a logical order that several of us mentioned having kids on the spectrum and that for a lot of folks, myself included, but an awful lot of other researchers that I run into in this space, that was the impetus, right? That's the thing that brought autism to their consciousness and drove them to shift their work in that direction. And as a guy for whom that is the case, it is sometimes really hard for me to not filter everything that I see through the lens of “how does this relate to or reflect my own child or my own experience with my child?” And in particular as a father, it is infuriating when what I know works best from the literature doesn't work best for us as a parent. And that's a frustrating spot to be in when I try to wear both hats at the same time. The second thing you've touched on is, it's been touched on a couple of times regarding the diversity and the intersecting identities that exist within autism. And one way in which my identity has really been front and center in my mind is, I mean, I'm the stereotypical autistic guy profile in terms of I'm a white upper middle class male, and I'm so conscious of that and so intentional about trying to take efforts to break that norm, yet there's a degree of impotence or ineffectiveness, at least in part because I'm not a part of Communities of Color. And I have been ineffectual thus far in being able to diversify the samples of students that we are getting, which I know is a constant frustration and difficulty and disappointment frankly. And then the last little bit is that I was doing and have been doing apparently accidental me-search, which I didn't realize. So I got my autism diagnosis literally a month ago. I've always seen the work I do through the lens of my kid or as a quasi-outsider. And so now to kind of think, "well, how has my identity unknowingly been shaping the work that I've been doing or the interpretation of the data I get?"

Emily Coombs: I think as an autistic person in this group, I'm noticing that all the autistic researchers have used their autism as this empowering engine. And all of those who are not autistic see the autism within their close connections as this empowering engine. And I think that's beautiful that we are all driven by autism in our own experience.

Dr. Jonathan Vincent: I suppose from my perspective, I'm not autistic myself, but my son is, so I'm a bit like Brad was just describing there, I am kind of seeing it through this prism in a way. But also I suppose as a practitioner, all of my pedagogical practice is at graduate level. So Master's and PhD students, many of which are autistic themselves. And I suppose what I've tried to do as much as I can is listen and empathize and be compassionate and offer constructive feedback and support because that's all I can do. And I'm trying to learn, I suppose, how best I can create these dialogic spaces for people. Because I think a lot of the time autistic students are going through that process of learning who they are at the same time as often maybe doing research which relates to autism and education and maybe even experiencing the trauma that comes back from reliving their own educational experiences. And so, as a lecturer and doctor supervisor, trying to create these dialogic spaces where people can feel that they're able to have those conversations and that they can be heard and be accepted.

Dr. Brett Ranon Nachman: ***For those of you who are researchers, what methodological challenges do you see as existing and potentially even compromising conducting studies involving autistic college students?***

Emily Coombs: So with the campus belonging stuff, one of the portions of this study is a survey study of current and recently graduated autistic students in Canada. And what we are finding is a really, really big problem with bots and bad actors, and it's been a massive challenge to sift through receiving 2000 responses. And my hope for the lab is that we can write up a methodology paper after we're done, but we've come up with a really awesome process. We have an ACP, so that's an autistic community partnership, and we have a large group of autistic researchers in the lab and in other labs with this study, and we have autistic researchers and community partners going through the data themselves at this entry level and filtering in. And it's been a really incredibly interesting collaborative process where autistic people are determining if our respondents are autistic so that we can send them the rest of the survey. And I'm going to push really hard to write it up, but even putting that back now on the researcher is that we have to talk about determining what makes someone autistic enough to even participate in a survey. How do we determine that? What resources are we putting towards that determination and does that onus fall on other autistic researchers or other autistic community partners to make that determination?

Dr. Bradley E. Cox: Emily, I had to chuckle when you started talking about that because we recently, as part of the PEACES project, we recently presented a paper at the Association for the Study of Higher Education and have two manuscripts that are just shy of submitting to journals specifically on that topic of either bad faith, human respondents or bots and similar experience. We felt ethically obliged to ensure that we could compensate people for their time. And so as soon as it became public, that data submission would all be online and you'd get paid for it. We had originally budgeted for 250 students and we had 1200 responses four days later. And “whoa, something's wrong there.” Thankfully we didn't pay out to all those folks, but realized that there was fraud happening. And over the last two or three years have developed a typology of 30 different mechanisms that are designed to prevent, deter, detect, and track fraudulent respondents. But I would say that over those three years of data collection, it's probably cost us a collective 300, 400 person hours to try to do that. And we've done pretty well to automate that process even. So I think that's definitely a challenge, If you only allow those with a formal diagnosis, you're cutting out folks who didn't have the time, the money or the knowledge or the opportunity to go get a formal diagnosis or the like. So it's this really challenging tension. It has to be open and broad to try to bring those people in, but at the same time, you make space for bringing in folks who have been inappropriately excluded from this research previously, that same door that opens for them opens the door for all kinds of fraud to try to sneak in as well.

Janelle Johnson: I'll only add for methodological challenges, making sure that accessibility is as broad of a scope as it should be. When you're thinking about supporting autistic students, neurodivergent students and stakeholders in research, for instance, for your long-term studies that might be multi-stage like a research project that I'm on, it was over the course of a year and a half. So then there's things to think through with regards to making sure that you have the right social support around the autistic individual to ensure that they are able to continue to be involved over time, because a lot of times they need support for communication, or they just don't have enough spoons, whatever it is. And then also other things. We know that being an autistic individual means that your likelihood for co-occurring disabilities and disorders is really high. So then it's important to think through all the other pieces. “Do we have alt text in our images or do we have captions? Do we have American Sign Language interpreters?” All the different pieces, making sure that everything is in place so that it is fully accessible for all the different types of autistic folks that will show up. And then, on top of that with accessibility, thinking about cultural accessibility, is this relevant culturally to the different intersections that are involved? So those are the things that I've been running into.

Dr. Edlyn Peña: I'm really happy you went first. I feel like you said much more than what I wanted to say, but it was really the piece about making, when we think about interview protocols, how do we make those accessible? For example, and I was recently a reviewer for a journal article or manuscript, and the author might be in this room for all I know, but they mentioned training or taking a training on inclusive interviewing methods. I'm not sure exactly the right term, but that was what I took away from it, and I thought, “that is so cool, I wish I had that.”

Dr. Bradley E. Cox: Two additional things that are somewhat related to what others have said here. The first is sample size and data availability. The only nationally representative data set of its sort in the US is 20 plus years old and of its own limitations, and frankly, so is every other large-scale dataset that I've seen on the topic, which limits the ability to do comparative or subgroup analysis, things of that nature. The second is as a person who has created their own survey and tried to collect some of this original data as well, we still have this constant tension between Emily, what you had talked about, the honoring of the self as they describe it, and the reality of trying to conduct large scale statistical analysis. And if somebody writes in an identity in the self-describe that, no one else has written the same thing or even similar things, what do we do with that person's data? And are we being performative by asking them?

Dr. Brett Ranon Nachman: ***There are a lot of challenges that data exists and engaging in this line of work. In what ways can college campuses themselves be made more inclusive of autistic students' strengths, skills, and or unique ways of being in the world?***

Emily Coombs: So to answer the first question, one of our autistic community partners said that universities need to understand that diversity exists and how people learn and present knowledge, that it is incredibly linked and a part of who we are. I think that is important that we have to normalize difference and normalize knowledge coming from different sources and different ways of presenting it.

Dr. Baiyina Muhammad: Yeah, I would add that one of the ways to make campus communities more inclusive of autistic students is listening to autistic students tell you what they need and actually providing the resources and supports that they need. And because I'm focused on HBCUs, that's the wheelhouse that I work in that I like to think about. And that's where very little work is being done around this disability writ large in autism, specifically thinking about the students who come in identified in those who don't have a diagnosis. Faculty need to have some tools in terms of expanding the way they think about transmitting knowledge. And I also think that it's important to make students aware of the supports that do exist on the campus and to ensure that they know that they're there. One thing I experienced this past semester, because I am a parent and I am a college professor and I'm doing this work, I get parents reaching out to me. And this semester there was a parent whose son was coming from Boston to North Carolina to go to one of the larger HBCUs in the state, and he wanted to know what he could do as the parent to support his son, but he also wanted his son to be acclimated on the university campus. And sadly, his son ended up going back home at the end of the semester because it was a failure in terms of how accessible the accessibility services were or warrant for him. Listening to students tell you what they need is hugely important.

Janelle Johnson: I just wanted to add that I actually did a preliminary phenomenological study on this, and it was on seven participants. And it yielded exactly what y'all just said as far as what the feedback was about, the types of things that these students and stakeholders said they would change about their university experience that would make it better for neurodivergent students. And the larger things were directly connected to the two things that you all just shared.

Dr. Brett Ranon Nachman: ***We have to ask ourselves where should the research be heading and how we work with and study autistic college students experiences?***

Emily Coombs: I think something that is incredibly unexplored, at least in the Canadian context, is this idea of co-design. So the campus belonging network, one of our final pillars of our study is co-designing policy curriculum and professional development for post-secondary institutions from autistic individuals in order to create the opposing force of what is assumed and understood by the institutions and what is actually what autistic students want and need. So the University of Calgary has created an amazing neurodiversity support system at their university, and that came from a co-design process that is working really well. Now at the University of Alberta and McMaster and Laurier, which is kind of spread throughout the spread throughout Canada, we're hoping to co-create policy that is what autistic students want.

Dr. Bradley E. Cox: You mentioned systems in there or you mentioned policy in there, and that made me think of the need to perhaps start with the narrow and then get broad, but to make sure that there's integration across those levels. And so right now, I think a lot of the efforts to help these students are piecemeal, they're disconnected, they are more aspirational than evidence driven. And in order for us to make these things effective, they do have to be part of an integrated, aligned set of systems and policies and structures that right now they're not talking to each other, they're not aligning policies or practices or funding or whatever that may be. So I think that's going to be a real challenge. It really does involve getting a wide range of stakeholders to buy into the same goal and to do so when they have different priorities or mechanisms of action.

Dr. Jonathan Vincent: Brad, that was exactly the point I was going to make, although I'm actually not a quantitative researcher. I recognize that the ambition we have often as researchers, as practitioners is to see change. And it's so difficult to do that when you are working in institutions where senior leaders say, “well, show me the numbers,” and you don't have it, and you're not able to make a case. And that's just at an institutional level. If you want to affect change at a state or a national level, you need to have the data to support that. And I think absolutely that's where we need to be headed, not only where we need to be headed, but in terms of being able to make that compelling case to politicians, to policy makers, to leaders in the sector. I think it is going to have to be based on who is there, what are they studying, what are the outcomes, where are the gaps, but also what is the potential that this group has? And that can only come when you, like you said, have that information at scale as well.

Dr. Edlyn Peña: Thinking about long-term outcomes for post-secondary or post-graduation. So what happens with career success? What happens with wellbeing or social fulfillment? So that would also require probably a large-scale dataset, but I think we need to make a case for, we know post-secondary education is important. But then what happens beyond that? Is higher education actually helping with their future success? And then going back to the intersectionality piece, continuing to do that. Just making sure we're doing more of a qualitative, diving deep into intersectional experiences and how we can serve students better given those experiences.

Janelle Johnson: I love everything that everyone said and fully agree. I had a lot of that on my note for this question. The only thing that I'll add is having mixed methods approaches. I believe a mixed methods approach will help in having the opportunity to build those larger data sets and produce data that can be presented in such a way that it can speak across sectors, across policy drivers and different things like that. The language of policy is mixed methods too, so they're used to seeing mixed methods studies. I think that's something that tends to be missing in autism research that I'm glad to have benefited from working with Dr. Pearson as a mixed methodologist and going on to continue doing mixed methods work in my own dissertation work. I think it's important,

Dr. Brett Ranon Nachman: ***The sentimentalist in me wants to know what is your biggest aha reflection or takeaway stemming from this conversation?***

Dr. Bradley E. Cox: I have been taken back in this conversation, considering all of the diversity of ways of thinking, of interests, of concerns or issues that permeate through the autism community or across higher education. I have been shocked by the level of consistency with which certain things have been referenced by multiple members of this call and in multiple contexts, institutional context, identity context, international context, practice versus research. I genuinely did not expect that there would be this much consensus about what needs to happen moving forward in this line of work.

Dr. Brett Ranon Nachman: ***That's what we call saturation. Hooray.***

Emily Coombs: I'll go second. I think we need to acknowledge that in this conversation we are all stakeholders, and I think that is an incredibly beautiful and serendipitous thing that happened. But also speaking to a larger trend in autism research, we're seeing more autistic autism researchers leading the charge and understanding our experiences. And now we're also seeing the immense love that parents of autistic individuals have and how both love for your person as being an autistic person and love for the autistic people in your life have motivated a full field of study. And I think that is really characteristic of the intersection of autism and PSC work. Like Brad said, it's me-search, and I think that this area of research has really bloomed out of me-search and out of motivation to make higher education accessible and applicable to autistic people.

Dr. Baiyina Muhammad: The biggest takeaway for me, or reinforced belief that I have is the necessity for interdisciplinarity and having access to a variety of different scholars from different fields, from different locations working on a variety of issues, enriches what I already know and reinforces the need for more collaborative work across space and areas of focus. So that's the biggest takeaway. Every time each one of you has said something, it's been firm for me that, yeah, this is really necessary. And it's also been a challenge for me to think about things through a different lens because I'm operating in my little area and not thinking in the way that you all are. So I appreciate this conversation.

Janelle Johnson: I'll hop in there and only because you said the word that I was going to say. *Collaborate*. That is my biggest takeaway from this. I've been sitting here in the conversation and thinking, 'okay, as soon as I get off this call, I need to add everyone on LinkedIn and I need to contact people and figure out how we can collaborate and work together,' because, well, I'm already an interdisciplinarian anyway. But the fact kind of like Brad and Emily were saying, the fact that we're all talking about the same thing despite being in different areas and different regions with different life experiences and what have you, it's just more of a testament for the need and the benefit of collaboration. So that was my biggest takeaway from our time together. Thanks for engaging with this conversation. I've really enjoyed it.

Dr. Jonathan Vincent: Look, you look at the news and the world around you, and it's hard not to despair and feel really despondent about what's happening. And I'm sure for people in the States that is probably much more keenly felt, but in this conversation, it's not despair so much as hope. I feel hopeful being in a conversation like this, talking to you all knowing that there are people who are dedicated and committed to developing good research, which will make a difference. And like you just mentioned, Janelle, the emphasis and collaboration of participatory approaches, the recognition of the intersectional identities that people hold that are important, and the desire that we have to affect change. And we represent an autism community and community of researchers. And I think they would echo a lot of those things and that gives me hope. And yeah, it's been a pleasure to take part in the conversation and it's nice to leave feeling slightly more positive about the world. So, thank you.

Dr. Edlyn Peña: Yes, I feel like in my work as a researcher in this field, and over the last, when I pivoted to autism and disability specifically 12, 13 years ago, I felt very isolated and going into conferences and even publishing, there wasn't a community. So today when we're gathering together and people have mentioned the words *gratitude* and *hopeful*, and I just feel those things very deeply right now because this work still can feel isolating in some ways. And it's nice to know that there's a growing community of practitioners, researchers, and anybody who reads this conversation or reads about this conversation should also feel encouraged that they are invited to participate in the scholarship, to continue growing with us and to collaborate with us because we need more folks doing this work. Obviously the autistic community welcomes and wants as much support as possible, especially given the current administration's policies in this climate. I am excited that we have the folks in this room to provide leverage and continue to work on necessary outcomes that are needed for empowering and making sure the community thrives. So I'm walking away feeling really good about the conversation, and thank you for inviting me. It's an honor to be a part of this conversation.

Takeaways and Opportunities for Transformation

The panelists relayed a bevy of viable approaches in working with and researching autistic college students.

Among more emergent areas to research include the following topics and considerations:

- Making sense of the high rates of autistic college students who also possess marginalized sexual and/or gender identities, including how institutions account for their intersectional needs.
- Determining *who* and *how* autistic college students have access to formal diagnoses, and to what extent there may be differences among BIPOC communities.

- Ascertaining which autistic college students gain resources to support their postsecondary success.

The challenges in conducting research with autistic college students are many, but several steps are worth implementing:

- Verifying the legitimacy of autistic student participants in studies through implementing measures to rule out potential fraudulence.
- Engaging in participatory action research where autistic collaborators are actively shaping the iterative design and analysis.
- Giving participants the space to self-describe their own identities, as opposed to choosing from a limited set of categories.
- Employing mixed-methods approaches, when possible, that can present more sophisticated understandings of student experiences.

Practitioners may be wise to incorporate the following strategies in their lines of work on college campuses to support their autistic students:

- Ensuring that autistic students achieve their professional goals and have opportunities to pursue jobs in the same fields as their majors, should they desire.
- Appreciating how crip time means that not all autistic college students must complete their undergraduate degrees in four years as a measure of their success.
- Designing spaces for autistic individuals to feel comfortable depending on their aspirations to socialize and/or exhibit agency.
- Elevating the prominence of faculty trainings for teaching autistic students.

Conclusion

We must see autistic students as not a collective, but rather a series of individuals, many of whom come from additionally marginalized backgrounds who appreciate that their autism does not define their whole identity, but can, in fact, offer additional possibilities. Research on autism in postsecondary education that veers beyond single-site studies and monolithic interpretations is relatively emergent, yes, but in tandem autistic researchers and students are collectively redefining the parameters of the conversation. These dialogues are built on assets-based approaches that recognize the real difficulties autistic people face, yet with the optimism that collaboration can foster new lines of thought. Autistic scholars are leading the charge on college campuses, proving that changing the narratives across research, administrative measures, and even policy necessitates drawing on lived experiences alongside working with the committed folks in these spaces who are themselves relatives, colleagues, and allies of autistic figures. Postsecondary education need not seem unattainable for autistic people with this ambition through the work that countless figures in academia – among them, the game-changer panelists here – live day in and day out.

Author Confirmation

B.R.N. organized the roundtable with all authors engaging in the actual roundtable dialogue; consequently, the panelists reviewed, made edits to, and approved the manuscript.

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