"THE BEACON ON CAMPUS": HOW AN AUTISM-SPECIFIC COMMUNITY COLLEGE SUPPORT PROGRAM ADDRESSES ABLEISM AND AUTISM ACCEPTANCE

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Abstract

Autism-specific college support programs (ASPs) are emerging to create more equitable transitions into higher education for autistic students. Such programming is necessary to guide autistic students' journeys as they navigate academia with greater agency. This case study, drawing on the social justice model of disability, explores how an ASP works to dismantle ableism on a community college campus. Findings suggest how the ASP gained legitimacy, surmounted challenges, and promoted autism acceptance in its quest to disrupt institutional ableism and, consequently, transform its campus into a more welcoming space for autistic students. Student affairs practitioners can draw on findings to eradicate ableist practices and messaging within their campus spaces.
Keywords: autism, disability, ableism, community colleges, autistic college students

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Autism-specific college support programs (ASPs) are rising in abundance across United States college campuses, up to at least 74 (Nachman et al., 2022), a rise from 45 several years earlier (Barnhill, 2016). This emergence of programs reflects the increase in the number of autistic college students, including at community colleges, in concert with heightened visibility and attention to autism in higher education (Shattuck et al., 2012; Snyder et al., 2019). ASPs offer numerous supports for autistic students, including peer mentors, social skills-centered courses, and specialized transition services (Cox et al., 2020). As autistic individuals experience higher unemployment and underemployment rates compared to other disabled people (Shattuck et al., 2012), building college success through ASP engagement is especially pivotal.

Relevant Literature

Programs designed for autistic students directly tailor their support and services to meet students' distinct characteristics and needs (Nachman, 2020). However, ASPs are underrepresented at community colleges, with only 11 in the United States (Nachman et al., 2022), despite nearly 81% of autistic students enrolling in higher education attending these institutions (Wei et al., 2014). Community colleges offer many benefits for autistic students, including smaller classes that enhance the likelihood of gaining more attention from educators (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Evans et al., 2017) and a variety of certifications and degrees for those with specialized interests (Highlen, 2016). Additionally, since fewer community college students live independently, autistic individuals who may not feel ready to leave their family home can delay those stressors (Perner, 2002). Despite autistic students tending to enroll at community colleges at higher rates than four year colleges and universities, an absence of scholarship on this front exists, as highlighted in Nachman (2021), who noted in a systematic literature re-

view of autism in higher education that only seven of 108 studies solely centered on autistic community college students. Published research has not yet explored the role of community college ASPs. This study aims to fill that gap, providing enlightenment on how these critical programs can serve autistic students who use community college as a mechanism for their post-secondary education pursuits.

ASPs provide support to autistic students in learning how to navigate social interactions (Barnhill, 2016), gain independence, and engage with autistic peers (Retherford & Schreiber, 2015; Siew et al., 2017). They also offer life skills support, peer mentors, and specialized orientation or transition services (Cox et al., 2020). Increasingly, some ASP-centered studies have featured autistic students' perspectives (e.g., Lei et al., 2020); however, none have explicitly included staff, faculty, and administrators as participants. Understandings of college employees' perspectives are often limited to studies showcasing campuses lacking ASPs (e.g., Austin & Peña, 2017; Knott & Taylor, 2014). Even more, although scholarship has begun to explore who runs these programs and where they are housed (Viezel et al., 2020), the context behind why ASPs are situated in specific spaces, how they adapt to campus cultures not designed for autistic people, and what their ultimate impacts entail in shaping students' lives and combatting ableism remain undiscovered.

Campus autism acceptance stems from knowledgeable staff and self-advocates broadening other individuals' understandings of autism. Often, holding conversations with disability services offices (DSOs; Barnhill, 2016) or having autistic students in a class (Austin & Peña, 2017) serve as ways for higher education staff members to attain autism education. Institutionalized ableism, however, influences how college stakeholders reproduce deficit-based narratives about autistic people (Nachman & Brown, 2020); as Whitaker and colleagues (2021) noted, "ableism manifests in the ways in which we talk about, and all too often, do

not talk about, disability within higher education" (p. 12). ASPs are significant in transforming campuses that minimally address autism and possess ableist mentalities to those that cultivate autism acceptance.

Theoretical Framework

To fully realize the significance of ASP staff, faculty, and administrators in redefining the landscape for autistic college students, particularly through their actions reflective of tenets associated with the social justice model of disability (Evans et al., 2017), it is imperative to first recognize how these stakeholders work against internalized and societal ableism, both pervasive (Campbell, 2008). Interrogating the prevalence of ableism enables possessing a more holistic view of the worlds that disabled people occupy.

Ableism and Internalized Ableism

Ableism exists in the disability community and society broadly and in the autism community specifically, and saturates every aspect of being (Campbell, 2008). This deficit-driven view suggests that "to be disabled is to be less than, a world where disability may be tolerated but in the final instance is inherently negative" (Campbell, 2008, p. 151). Larger societal structures, including schools, make judgments about disability by establishing who can access accommodations and what is considered socially acceptable behaviors or characteristics (Evans et al., 2017; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2018; Kattari et al., 2018). As Evans and colleagues (2017, p. 2) note, "by stigmatizing only particular forms of assistance, ableism makes invisible the fact that all people are interdependent, relying on each other for multiple forms of help." As children grow up in spaces where they receive concerning messaging from seemingly every direction, they begin to process these harmful beliefs. They may engage in passing behaviors to mask or censor traits associated with their disability (Campbell, 2008). Such are the ramifications of internalized ableism, in which general societal judgments infiltrate the individual.

Over time, disabled individuals absorb and assume the problematic sentiments passed along their way, exacerbating internalized ableism (Campbell, 2008; Evans et al., 2017; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2016). Processing these feelings may result in behaviors like fearing interactions with other disabled individuals (dispersal) or conforming to behaviors deemed as more acceptable (emulating the norm), and even taking on incongruent identities (holding disabled subjectivities; Campbell, 2008). These experiences contribute to enhanced internalized ableism, in which the person views traits they associate with their disability as negative and seeks to be viewed in a "normal" light, as Campbell, (2008) recognized.

Social Justice Model of Disability and Academic Ableism

I identified the ASP at the heart of my study by pinpointing one program focusing on autistic students' strengths and embedding social justice into its infrastructure, as illustrated on the mission of its website. The social justice model of disability – advanced by Evans et al. (2017) and earlier proposed by Evans and Herriott (2009) – was employed to both disrupt ableism and honor the ASP's framework. This model recognizes individual, institutional, and societal ableism that perpetuates discriminatory and exclusive practices that marginalize people with disabilities (Evans et al., 2017). Evans and colleagues (2017, p. 74) also shared that the model aims to engage in an "elimination of ableism, redefinition of normal, respect and equity, and development of a positive disability identity." Consequently, this model offers perspective into how organizational change requires widespread re-envisioning of disability and honoring an individual's full set of identities and experiences, one where non-disabled individuals' power does not further oppress disabled people (Evans & Herriott, 2009).

Recognizing ableism is only the foundation

of what the social justice model of disability promotes, with upending these practices represents the end goal. Academic ableism may manifest in higher education environments where disabled people are described medically, excluded, and omitted from decisions (Dolmage, 2017). Among the ways that academic ableism presents itself entail students needing to disclose their diagnoses to disability services to obtain accommodations and supports – as opposed to classrooms being designed to serve *all learners* – underfunding disability services and staff who run it, and displacing disabled faculty in adjunct roles. People in power also wield their influence in how they use discourse, as in the case of framing syllabi language to meet students' needs or, puzzlingly, putting the onus on students to engage in in-person exchanges about needing accommodations (Dolmage, 2017).

Efforts to dismantle academic ableism often stem from disabled institutional stakeholders (e.g., Long & Stabler, 2021), though they require institutional leaders to critically analyze long-standing practices of how they engage with and shape disabled individuals' experiences. Unfortunately, leaders may avoid exposing ableism's toxic ramifications due to fearing repercussions from placing blame and noting hypocrisy in the academy, though doing so is deemed necessary for enacting systematic change (Dolmage, 2017). For instance, leaders may fear that pointing out problematic language about disability on their campus websites could instigate disdain from colleagues who unintentionally portray disability in a demeaning manner. Adopting the social justice model of disability and accounting for academic ableism enables college leaders to confront the oppression that disabled people, including autistic students, staff, and faculty, experience across college contexts.

This study's ASP – the Captains of Autism in Community College (CACC)[1] – bases it is messaging and curriculum on the social justice model

of disability tenets. During an informational session, Elizabeth, the program director, expressed that CACC "seeks to empower" autistic people and "sees barriers to access as the problem." The social justice model of disability can be broadened to the institutional level, inspiring questions on how the college generally (Blue Moon Community College [BMCC]) broaches disability in its messaging and policies. In this study, I illustrate how CACC specifically and BMCC broadly work toward eradicating academic ableism. Collectively these efforts build autism acceptance, "a social justice movement working to challenge ableism by promoting equality, access, and participation for autistics" (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2016, p. 5).

Methodology

In situating my subjectivity as a former autistic community college student, I employed a constructivist epistemology. This approach is commonly used by case study researchers (Merriam, 1998) to construct knowledge alongside participants through building relationships, realizing that information is co-generated and shaped by each party's distinct realities. In particular, I prioritized social constructivism because it acknowledges how knowledge stems from individuals' engagement with settings and centers the role of learning as a social process (Kim, 2001). This approach also recognizes the distinctions held in perceiving a situation and space, often iterative and based on how non-disabled individuals establish norms (Jones, 1996). Following a social constructivist epistemology allowed for examining participants' evolving understandings of autism and determining how they elevated the community college's campus autism acceptance, in concert with my own reinterpretation of my identity as an autistic autism researcher.

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[1]Pseudonyms are used throughout the manuscript to mask the institution, program, and participants.

Institutional Context

Located at BMCC, a suburban community college, the CACC program represents one of the longest-running, and largest ASPs in the U.S. CACC currently operates within BMCC's career center as a reflection of administrative support from staff in that program. Four staff members run CACC, including two full-time autistic personnel. Peer mentors handle other operations, including holding weekly meetings with students, whereas college faculty embedded in various disciplines teach the program's credit-bearing courses focused on topics like self-advocacy and communication. CACC programming entails peer mentor meetings, socials, and campus educational efforts. I selected this site due to its longevity, size, and richness of offerings for a community college ASP; fewer than a dozen ASPs exist at these institutions (Nachman et al., 2022). Since I aimed to showcase a foundational example of an ASP that could be a model for other similar programs, CACC fit the bill.

Data Collection and Participants

This research was framed as a case study to best unpack CACC's various facets, including its history, growth, challenges, and personalities, as well as its relationships with other campus entities and stakeholders (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009); in tandem, the study also frames CACC's director (Elizabeth) as an individual case, as they-represent the program's face and driver. This study incorporates many data sources (interviews, observations, and document analysis) inherent in case studies (Yin, 2017).

Three methods were employed. First, I interviewed four CACC staff members and nine BMCC administrators, staff, and faculty, amounting to 19 interviews total due to conducting multiple interviews with key leaders in CACC to obtain the fullest context. These semi-structured interviews featured distinct protocols (varying depending on the stakeholder group) and were professionally transcribed, lasting 50-100 minutes. Communicating with Elizabeth provided access to campus personnel beyond the CACC program. Second, I conducted three one-hour observations – a CACC information session, a campus tour, and a CACC self-advocacy class session – to situate the role of autism and CACC on campus. Third, I reviewed dozens of documents from BMCC's website and CACC internally (e.g., orientation materials, syllabi) to interrogate how disability and autism have been framed across a variety of settings and platforms.

Whereas my larger study on autism in community colleges involves autistic students (Nachman, 2021), for this particular study, I focused solely on institutional staff to prioritize their responsibilities in addressing ableism, counteracting the common narrative in which disabled people are held responsible for defying the oppressive practices placed on them (Long & Stabler, 2021).

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of descriptively coding interviews, observations, and documents, using in vivo coding (to honor participants' direct verbiage), and applying emotion coding (to capture participants' feelings; Saldaña, 2016). Axial coding was then used to chunk similar codes (e.g., "false information [about autism]," "severity [of disability]," and "cannot be successful [due to disability's impact]") into broader categories like "deficit views" to better understand the landscape of how college stakeholders may perceive autism.

Both deductive and inductive approaches were employed. An initial list of codes stemming from the literature on autism in higher education and ASPs was formed prior to coding data (e.g., "ASP programming," "stigma," "advocacy"). Additionally, I developed original codes within pre-established categories ("ASP programming") and used axial coding to situate and re-situate emergent categories that iteratively surfaced. These approaches allowed for continually re-interpreting of understandings of ableism and autism, both upon entering the study and later alongside participants.

Positionality

As an autistic community college graduate, I entered this study with an innate sense of responsibility to spotlight the work that these institutions, and the people who work within them, do to serve autistic people. While I was not fortunate enough to participate in an ASP myself, I know they hold a key role in shifting autistic students' trajectories, as well as helping them navigate college more smoothly. In selecting to conduct my research at BMCC, an institution with whom I had no previous connection, I had to gain leaders' faith, and I believe disclosing my personal and professional connections to this community elevated feelings of trust. Yet I was also direct about my need to present a holistic picture of the college and program, not just the optimistic components, to understand CACC's role on campus. My positionality influenced my research design, from the interview questions that addressed the subtleties associated with autism to even my own attentiveness to small details in spaces while conducting observations. Similarly, my autistic identity carried into the data analysis process, such as intentionally using in vivo coding to prioritize the words individuals use, and recognizing the prevalence of neurotypical people communicating about autistic individuals.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies worked to enhance the study's trustworthiness. Writing research memos enabled me to interrogate my evolving engagement with participants who provided a more complex and nuanced picture of CACC's role on campus. In addition to gathering CACC staff feedback regarding terminology and protocols to bolster construct validity (Yin, 2017), I engaged in member checking by presenting my interpretations of findings to Elizabeth and Taylor (program manager) following data analysis. Concurrently I created an audit trail by scrupulously describing my data collection and analytical procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) within the larger study from which this study's data derives (Nachman, 2021). Meth-

odological triangulation was achieved by engaging in various methods that best suited the particular data (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). For example, to understand CACC programmatic messaging, I reviewed how website descriptions aligned with or differed from how campus personnel explained them via interviews. I continuously examined their biases by crafting written reflections on how their perspectives aligned with or contradicted societal demonstrations of ableism, and I consulted with a colleague to obtain their perspective on how my reflections may have supported or contradicted what the data revealed. Glaser (2007) lends a reminder that "bias is just another variable and a social product" (p. 95), and through engaging in constant comparative analysis, I checked my own interpretations against what participants shared. This process works to honor constructivism's aim to gather credible data, one that is shaped by processing information in tandem. Researcher bias cannot be eliminated, but clearly noted and viewed in concert with participants' perspectives.

Findings

Data analysis resulted in three primary themes. These themes reflect the processes CACC has undergone to dismantle ableism on campus, including adopting a strengths-based philosophy, gaining legitimacy, and promoting autism acceptance.

Adopting a Strengths-Based Philosophy

When tasked to start CACC, Elizabeth, an established autistic autism advocate and BMCC employee, knew they had a massive responsibility. Drawing on her wealth of experiences in the autism community, including researching transition programs across the U.S., Elizabeth developed a robust and iterative infrastructure that prioritizes the social justice model of disability and addresses ableism. Across five interviews with Elizabeth, a clear theme emerged. CACC works to make autistic students feel good about themselves.

> I just want them to understand that they are okay because so many of them come in feeling like they are not okay and that they cannot socialize, and they cannot do this, and they cannot start their projects, and they cannot do so many things. Thus, I want them to start focusing on what they can do and how to use those strengths.

Elizabeth honors a strengths-based approach in all CACC components, seeking that students leverage their skills and interests while concurrently building on opportunities where growth is needed. This mentality extends to enabling students to feel good about who they are, regardless of their differences and presentations of autism that are often viewed as socially unacceptable. Immediately an explicit component of the social justice model of disability surfaces in this approach: defying the commonality of non-disabled individuals imparting their power and privilege on disabled people's ways of life.

Elizabeth shared that autistic and neurotypical people both have a responsibility to meet each other halfway, essentially understanding their distinct ways of processing situations and sharing skills, reinforcing a disability justice narrative of valuing interdependence (Evans et al., 2017). Grace, a CACC instructor, shared that this outlook translates to "acknowledging the things we're great at and the things we're not so great at, and let's come up with tools to address it." This mindset is clearly outlined in many documents that were reviewed, including one of CACC's course syllabi, which stated that a learning outcome was for students to "develop a personal plan for maximizing strengths and setting goals." Meanwhile, the call for proposals for an annual autism acceptance event that CACC hosts sought those "that focus on supporting autistic strengths, culture, and identity, rather than attempting to fix autistic individuals towards becoming more like typically-developing peers."

Reframing the autism narrative undergirds CACC's infrastructure: "My bottom-line belief is that [at] our soul... is that we are also humans," Elizabeth explained. In validating students' concerns and perspectives, finding ways for them to showcase their strengths, and humanizing their experiences that have for too long been silenced, CACC staff instill pride, purpose, and respect.

Elizabeth relayed this messaging at a CACC information session. With a focus on "seek[ing] to empower" autistic students, Elizabeth shared how CACC works to reify understandings of autism. "We believe there are many acceptable ways of being in the world, as long as students are following the student code of conduct," Elizabeth shared. Throughout, Elizabeth validated prospective students' questions and concerns.

Most saliently, embracing a strengths-based philosophy has required CACC to explicitly note what ableism is, how it manifests, and what students can implement to counteract its pervasiveness. Elizabeth shared that, upon joining CACC, students learn how to possess initiative and that their perspectives matter, a marked contrast to the "internalized ableism-type statements" akin to the "'I'm not good at communicating with other people' [that] they've been told." She operationalizes ableism from the earliest programming and, within CACC courses, instructors embed opportunities for students to investigate how this concept materializes.

Ultimately, though, institutions are responsible for altering broader discourse, prompting Elizabeth to collaborate with colleagues across campus to host trainings on topics including intersectionality, a social justice model of disability pillar (Evans et al., 2017). Aztec, a BMCC administrator who orchestrates events alongside Elizabeth, explained that in their programming they work to reduce ableist norms that illustrate how staff may be "privileging other identities or abilities" in their daily practices. For instance, "when you set deadlines, [we demonstrate how] 'this is how it's a little more ableist or elitist or classist because we are assuming mobility, you're assuming resources

are available for them to be timely.'" Throughout these dialogues, Aztec and peers expose colleagues to ableist practices that can be easily dismantled and eventually build a more empathetic and accepting campus culture.

Gaining Legitimacy

CACC has aimed to attain campus support for autistic students, much like disabled people, who have long aimed to be legitimized by non-disabled individuals who have reinforced oppressive structures. Once again, elements of the social justice model of disability filter into CACC's ethos. Upon launching as a pilot program, CACC initially experienced many barriers that could have compromised its continuation. For one, Elizabeth worked underneath a psychologist who employed what they described as "pseudo-therapy," which alienated students and nullified the strengths-based framework they envisioned for the program. Elizabeth was openly mocked during meetings. Not until her colleague was fired did Elizabeth possess the means to construct the program they imagined, one that would empower autistic students. Unfortunately, CACC's possibilities remained compromised by operating within a deficit-based disability services office (DSO) that tends to communicate about disabled students in medicalized ways based on the reliance of proof of documentation.

Furthermore, CACC's donation-reliant funding structure that it primarily operated on for years limited its growth potential and value. Elizabeth shared that despite CACC enlisting dozens of new students each year to the college, in turn boosting overall college enrollment and funds broadly, she felt defeated at times. Recently CACC had obtained a yearly budget, enough to cover peer mentors, professional development opportunities, and other tools to support programmatic growth. CACC's structural shift, now be housed in the campus career center, also reflected new changes, one where staff would obtain more salient support.

Administrative changes precipitated a new

era for CACC, not only in garnering a budget and more personnel, but also in organizationally relocating from the DSO to the career center. During this study's data collection period, CACC was also transitioning its physical spaces from a small, shared suite in the corner of a major campus building to its own suite with private offices, rooms for peer mentor meetings, and common spaces. The campus' administrative changeover, featuring new staff who more explicitly recognized the significance of CACC in supporting autistic students, marked a new era for campus autism acceptance. "We need to be making sure that we're empowering that program to guide us and be kind of the beacon on campus," Wonder, a CACC instructor, said in illustrating CACC's importance.

Several factors have contributed to CACC attaining greater respect on campus. Thanks to CACC's presence and campus impact, BMCC has reaped national recognition as a top college for autistic college students. "We make the national news a lot and they [college leaders] love us [for that]," Taylor said. CACC consistently obtains requests from comparable colleges on how to build their own ASPs. "If the college is applying for an award or, you know, some kind of recognition, they would... put [CACC] on the list to highlight," Nigel, a BMCC administrator, noted. Even more, CACC boasts a 90% retention rate among students, higher than BMCC's college student population broadly. CACC's reach is further felt across campus trainings that embed autism as part of the curriculum, enabling faculty and staff to possess more tools to draw from in working with neurodivergent students.

Promoting Autism Acceptance

While dismantling ableism does not unfold overnight, more spaces on campus, including in person and virtual spaces – are increasingly framing discussions about autism in more of a holistic manner that recognizes strengths alongside challenges, as well as rights and responsibilities that everyone holds in building a more inclusive

setting. This mindset illustrates the campus progressively honoring a core component of the social justice model of disability: advocating for equity across all higher education spaces for disabled people. No longer is autism a rarely discussed topic; CACC has elevated its prominence and, perhaps more notably, its receptivity.

In addition to the campus-wide trainings that Elizabeth spearheads alongside colleagues like Aztec, they presents additional opportunities for campus stakeholders to engage with autism content. Faculty drop-in hours allow educators to meet with Elizabeth to discuss course challenges involving autistic students and to determine viable outcomes. Taylor explained how many instructors utilize this space: "I would say, more often than not, the faculty [who have] gone from, you know, pretty uneducated or uninformed about neurodiversity, [are] our shining stars... [who] have gone to [Elizabeth's] trainings on campus." Laura, BMCC's student conduct manager, recognized that more faculty engage in help-seeking behaviors through realizing Elizabeth's resourcefulness. She, too, turns to Elizabeth for support about issues that occasionally emerge with autistic students, understanding that proactively problem-solving with students who may act out when feeling frustrated or aggravated avoids potential incidents. Furthermore, engaging with autistic students before situations escalate enable Laura to learn about challenges they may face, thus hopefully mitigating the likelihood of needing to file a conduct report. In turn, these instances build autism acceptance, contrary to media depictions of autistic students breaking down under duress.

On the other hand, Laura noted the contradictions of campus staff fearing to file a report or complaint about autistic students out of being potentially viewed as ableist. Such are the complexities of campus stakeholders serving a community that can be, at times, both viewed as unacceptable and requiring discipline, yet in the same breath excusable and fragile. Double standards exist, but part of autism acceptance, as Elizabeth noted, is

in identifying potential challenges early and consistently communicating with many campus units.

Elizabeth's facility to elevate autism acceptance has connected once-siloed community college spaces. Several staff referenced Elizabeth as the person who unifies stakeholders by raising understanding of autism, a central piece linking each part of campus. Taylor said that Elizabeth "is very intentional about going places, networking, getting the name of the program out there and being part of the whole conversation, because it is a growing movement." Through building relationships across people and entities, Elizabeth has established themselves and CACC as invaluable resources on autism education. CACC's website, for instance, boasts links, documents, and faculty resources on supporting all students with diverse learning needs.

Additional staff members lead the charge for autism acceptance. Akin to the campus tours she hosts for incoming students, Mackenzie, a BMCC staff member and mother of a CACC student alum, provided a campus tour to showcase BMCC's multitude of programs and centers. Outside of one office, drawings draped the window. Mackenzie shared that her son had crafted this piece of artwork, featuring a few characters communicating with one another, albeit one character stood from afar, watching his peers play a game. The outsider character's thought bubble featured the phrase, "I wish I could just fit in with others." This piece laid bare his feelings of exclusion. Mackenzie's son ended up graduating from CACC, attaining his associate's from BMCC, and was working toward a bachelor's degree in animation. This campus tour, featuring autistic students' contributions, rendered disability more explicit.

Discussion

Community colleges present a duality to students, including autistic individuals. In one breath, they create an open admissions space where all are seemingly welcome and have fewer structural

barriers than four-year institutions (Kezar, 2002). Conversely, community colleges may simultaneously lack cohesiveness due to traditionally featuring autonomous units lacking common intentions (Bok, 1986; Jackson et al., 2013). BMCC boasts some staff, such as Wonder and Aztec, committed to autistic student inclusion. However, spreading this mission across a campus "siloed like the tentacles of a jellyfish," as described by one staff member I met on my campus tour, is nothing short of daunting.

Informing numerous stakeholders about ableist practices has presented an opportunity for Elizabeth to promote CACC as a home for autistic students and also a platform for providing autism education and understanding across a campus boasting thousands of potential allies. Their goal is to find unity over the campus' shared commitment to social justice, in particular referring to the social justice model of disability as a pillar in promoting the acceptance of varied experiences within the disability community. While challenging for a campus that features "departments [that] have trouble partnering and sort of merging or building those relationships when they need to," Kelsey, a BMCC staff member noted, Elizabeth and their autism-focused colleagues are steadfast, as evidenced in Elizabeth's office hours with faculty and trainings. In this way, CACC's impact on campus climate manifests. People know Elizabeth as the go-to person in learning about autism, and more individuals are drawing on CACC's tenets to inform their own teaching. Yet CACC has also experienced its fair share of institutionalized ableism in obtaining few resources until recent years (e.g., administrative and financial support). Hence, building community, even in the face of blockades like restricted funding, becomes even more important for marginalized groups of people like those who identify as autistic.

Sadly, when minoritized individuals are essentially segregated to less-visible spaces – as in the case of CACC's distant, limited physical location – they may feel even less welcomed (Fos-

te, 2021). Once again, institutionalized ableism emerges by sending an unequivocal message: *this* is where you belong. Physical positioning in this manner also reinforces what the social justice model of disability signifies: pushing against how non-disabled people set standards that oppress disabled counterparts. These actions can also limit a program's efficacy in having reach across campus. Essentially, a program's physical location in the shadows continues to subdue the significant work it has accomplished and inhibits its potential to "be seen" by more who could access services. Nonetheless, following data collection, CACC was shifting to a new physical location, one replete with numerous offices and a more central location for visibility purposes.

Although CACC was gradually gaining a more salient impact across campus, especially in terms of familiarity amongst non-autistic campus stakeholders, Taylor explained that a continued lack of awareness and acceptance of autistic colleagues' differences compromised programmatic possibilities. The siloed nature of cross-unit interactions across campus only exacerbated the issue. "I think people in general on campus don't really understand what it is that we [at CACC] do and know that they aren't the experts," she explained. Steadily CACC has extended its reach across campus, from enlisting BMCC faculty to teach its courses centered on topics like communication and wellness, to participating in broad faculty trainings. Heightened presence can work to counteract the eminence of campuses' unfamiliarity and hostility toward autism, as studies demonstrate the prevalence of such biases (e.g., Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014; Knott & Taylor, 2014). Yet, with greater contact with autistic people, neurotypical individuals may hold more favorable perceptions (Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014) and, in turn, feel more comfortable engaging with autistic people (Nevill & White, 2011). In this manner, the interdependence element inherent in the social justice model of disability becomes more salient.

Transitioning from mere autism education

to autism acceptance requires institutional stakeholders to shift their premises and priorities. As new BMCC administrators have sought input from CACC on enhancing inclusivity in faculty trainings and even translated tenets from CACC policies into the college-wide first-year experience course, a culture shift has unfolded. However, one challenge remains, even with heightened interest in supporting the autistic community and eliminating deficit-based language, traditions, and perspectives: distributing the responsibility of elevating autism acceptance. For years, CACC staff, autistic students, and their closest allies have wielded this duty, though increasingly, other campus members are shouldering the load of informing their colleagues about what ableism represents and how to learn more about autism. They learn no one individual solely promotes autism acceptance.

Limitations and Delimitation

Two primary limitations were associated with this study. First, neurotypical participants may have demonstrated self-favorability bias, not uncommon with studies involving non-student perspectives, when discussing autistic people (Dallas et al., 2018; Nevill & White, 2011). It is possible that staff and faculty avoided communicating about autism in a deficit-based manner due to their awareness of my autistic affiliation and CACC's notability on campus and to preserve their own images as autistic advocates. Thankfully, participants appeared transparent in acknowledging their shortcomings and opportunities for growth, though they could have also been more deliberate in their use of language given the study's focus. For instance, Jake, CACC instructor, described teaching "some severe autistic individuals" as opposed to describing students whose autism-related characteristics are more socially unacceptable or salient. Second, I relied on Elizabeth as the gatekeeper to enlist participants outside of CACC staff, meaning that all of the faculty and staff I connected with had some direct connection with

or strong knowledge of CACC. Therefore, I interviewed individuals who possessed a heightened foundation of autism, perhaps more so than other campus colleagues.

I also want to note a delimitation based on the intentionality of selecting a college (BMCC) known for its strong autistic presence based on CACC's reputation. This example makes it an anomaly and thus not necessarily an even match to the majority of community colleges that lack such explicit autism-centered programming and have a high enrollment of autistic students who have disclosed their diagnoses.

Implications for Practice

As more ASPs like CACC surface on college campuses, over time, there must be enhanced attention toward programmatic evaluations of what ASPs accomplish and in what ways they impact their primary stakeholders (autistic students) and campus climate broadly. Given ASP staff's limited time and resources, it appears campus administrators may require enlisting institutional researchers or even outside evaluators, to identify what programmatic practices and priorities are having their intended effects. These insights could influence what new approaches ASP staff take to connect with other campus stakeholders and how to reframe messaging or programming to bolster widespread autism acceptance.

Reducing the prominence of academic ableism necessitates institutional staff, including student affairs practitioners, to take a hard look at the structures they have built and make an investment in detecting and addressing harm, regardless of an ASP's existence. Instructors can review their syllabi and curriculum to ensure students know how to access accommodations (Evans et al., 2017) and pinpoint materials that may reinforce false, ableist stereotypes. ASP staff could enlist autistic students – compensating them for their time and efforts, of course – to review examples of course content to illustrate examples of problematic lan-

guage and content about disability. This strategy could even lead to developing a faculty guide derived from the insights of autistic students, which could be used campus-wide. Departmentally, staff can reconsider accessibility standards in how course content is delivered and processed. Student life spaces, in planning events, may more intentionally determine how certain programming may limit disabled individuals' participation due to sensory-based barriers. In redefining their strategic plans and priorities, administrators may more saliently back up their commitment to social justice issues by also notably embedding disability acceptance into such verbiage.

Autistic students benefit when multiple campuses supports work collaboratively to support their needs and strengths (Anderson et al., 2019). Although Elizabeth was making a significant effort to connect with various campus entities to build a united front in meeting autistic students' opportunities, this job should not fall on them solely. Other college leaders must reach across campus to build alliances as well (Whitaker et al., 2021). Leaders must establish autism acceptance as an institutional priority, echoed in their messaging and actions. Every measure, from offering a variety of modalities for orientations that support incoming students' comfort levels to enlisting notable autistic activists for lecture series, signals the type of environment sought for all community members. Setting up partnerships with local high schools to orient prospective students, in particular autistic students who may benefit from early exposure to the support they can obtain at the local community college, can also be powerful. Eventually, colleges work to show their communities that they do not place the onus on the autistic student to conform to an environment that may be unfamiliar with or unwelcoming of their distinct ways of being, or, for that matter, their additional marginalized identities that operate in concert with autism (Miller et al., 2020).

Implications for Research

This study demonstrates the possibilities of building a community of autism acceptance, and subsequent research would benefit from exploring how autistic community college students have processed institutionalized ableism. Uncovering their interpretations may also offer enlightenment on how belonging to autistic-centered campus communities may foster belongingness (Frost et al., 2019); this topic is currently underexplored in the community college landscape.

Researchers possess an opportunity to examine their own ableist tendencies by following various approaches. Most foundationally, reframing wording across all types of research instruments is key. Zilvinskis (2021) offered new conceptualizations of disability-based items in the National Survey of Student Engagement, and I echo this call for focusing on how students view themselves and allowing them to determine which disability or disabilities impact their learning, working, or living activities. Researchers should use language like "impact," as opposed to "challenges," as this latter term inherently implies deficits. Instead, this verbiage exhibits to participants that disability, much like other identities, is contextual. Additionally, interview questions like "how can your program courses be redesigned to better meet the strengths of disabled people?" prompt participants to provide actionable recommendations of how colleges can better support all learners. Through adopting such techniques, researchers signal to participants the power of wording in presenting a different narrative than they are accustomed to.

More intentionally engaging in reflexivity about their own biases and connections to the disability community would behoove researchers. Secules and colleagues (2021) demonstrate that interrogating the notion of "researcher-as-instrument" enables scholars to deeply reconcile the relationships they hold with participants and how they communicate those sentiments in their work. The absence of positionality statements and re-

searcher reflexivity across scholarly spaces, specifically any personal connection to disability, should prompt concern and change.

There is also merit in studying further how ASPs come to fruition. While this study examined this program's emergence under the context of institutionalized ableism, additional scholarship may entertain exploring the factors that drive the development of ASPs, including increased enrollment. Investigating the key characteristics that shape colleges to invest in ASPs may shed light on opportunities for how other campus units, including libraries (Anderson, 2021), work in partnership with them to support students' success.

Conclusion

ASP staff, in concert with campus allies, are paving promising paths for other colleges to follow. Through its social justice-focused philosophy and programming, CACC demonstrates the changes that campuses nationwide can institute, ASP or not, to reframe campus conversations on disability and autism acceptance. In that endeavor, campuses can translate words into actions by making their spaces more welcoming for autistic learners.

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