

# UCLA Tarjan Center ACCESS Newsletter

Advancing College Capacity for Equitable Student Success

## WELCOME!

*This newsletter aims to provide a convenient and current resource for information related to postsecondary education for students with developmental disabilities, such as autism and intellectual disability. While our primary focus will be on content relevant to the California Community College system, much of the newsletter will have broader applicability.*

## Amber Perez Memorial Scholarship

The California Association for Postsecondary Education & Disability (CAPED) is accepting applications for a new scholarship for college students with intellectual disability and/or autism. The scholarship, announced in October 2023, honors the memory of Amber Perez, the establishing College to Career (C2C) coordinator at Shasta College and former Director of Disabled Student Programs and Services.



Her husband, Richard Moore, is also part of the Shasta College community. He says, “Amber had a lifelong love of learning, and a passion for seeing people reach their potential... She could make ideas happen.”

- Invite your students to apply through August 31st.
- Donate to this scholarship fund by credit card through Paypal and note “Amber Perez Memorial Scholarship”.

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# Research Insights:

## The intersection of autistic and LGBTQ+ identities

Researchers have been paying more and more attention to the intersectional identities of autistic people. Although estimates vary across studies, recent data suggest autistic people are more likely to identify with non-heterosexual orientations, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or asexual. Additionally, there are significantly higher rates of gender diversity in autistic people, including transgender and non-binary identities. It is critical for colleges to consider this intersectionality, especially as autistic and LGBTQ student enrollment in college are both independently growing.

**Research data consistently show that autistic people are more likely to identify as LGBTQ+**

This year, a research group led by E.F. Soto looked at autism as well as sexual and gender minority (SGM) identities in over 80,000 college students. Both autism and SGM increased risk for academic challenges and mental health problems; however, holding multiple marginalized identities amplified this effect. **Autistic college students who also identified with sexual and/or gender minority identities experienced the greatest levels of stress, loneliness, self-harm, and suicidality.**

### So, what can your college do?

- Strengthen mental health through risk assessment training and therapeutic supports.
- Create and support campus LGBTQ+ or Pride Centers.
- Refer students to resources from CCC and in the community.
- In all of the above, involve DSPS offices given intersectional identities.



Soto, E. F., Orantes, D., Russo, N., & Antshel, K. M. (2024). Autism and sexual and gender minority identity in college students: Examination of self-reported rates, functional outcomes, and treatment engagement. *Autism*.



# Document Accessibility for Neurodivergent Students

In our most recent ACCESS webinar, Angela Tran, an alternate media specialist at Santa Ana College, discussed ways to make college course materials more accessible for all students. If you missed it, [watch the webinar here](#). To learn more, the [California Community College Accessibility Center](#) has compiled resources and created a [self-paced document accessibility course](#) for CCC staff. Another excellent resource for college faculty and staff is [WebAIM](#), which offers a [color contrast checker](#) as well as instructional guides for

[Powerpoint](#), [Word](#), and [PDF](#). The Association for University Centers on Disabilities has a [helpful guide on plain language](#). Below, we've highlighted what may be particularly important for students with intellectual disability and/or autism.

## Presentation and Organization

Autistic students may have [slower processing speed](#) and may [struggle to see the "big picture"](#) as readily.

Instructors can:

- Provide class materials in advance.
- Record lectures to allow review.
- Avoid overcrowding slides
- Use formatting (e.g., bold, sub-bullets) to clarify importance and connections
- Include unique slide titles and takeaway slides.

## Plain Language

- Prioritizes clear, concise, easy-to-understand language.
- Reduces time and mental effort for **all** students.
- Improves comprehension and learning.

Instructors can use online writing editors, such as [Hemingway](#), to check reading level and identify complex sentences to correct.

## Screen Reader Access

Some students with intellectual disability have stronger listening skills and benefit from screen readers.

Instructors can check headings, reading order, and alternative text for images.

# Evolving Inclusive Language: Policy and Practice

Last issue, we shared an inclusive language guide specific to autism. However, it is essential to acknowledge that different disability communities have distinct preferences and that language evolves over time. It is our professional responsibility to remain informed, adjust our practice, and advocate for respectful language for all.

In October 2023, the California state legislature passed Assembly Bill 248, which made non-substantive changes to eliminate obsolete terminology, such as “mental retardation”, from existing law. Terminology is now replaced with “individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.” California was over a decade behind the federal government, which passed similar legislation, Rosa’s Law, in 2010 - driven by advocacy from the family of a young girl with intellectual disability. This speaks to the need for ongoing advocacy and conversation in our state. As Rosa’s brother said: *“Some say we shouldn’t worry about the words, just the way we treat people. But if you think about it, what you call people is how you treat people. If we change the words, maybe it’ll be the start of a new attitude towards people with intellectual disabilities. And they deserve it.”*

In the theme of updating language, the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) is proposing a name change to Disability Works California to better reflect the employment-focused services they provide to diverse disability communities. *“People with disabilities and employers do not associate the word ‘rehabilitation’ with jobs, good wages, and equity, nor does rehabilitation accurately describe the services we provide,”* said DOR Director Joe Xavier. *“These initiatives will accelerate our work supporting pathways and removing barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities, modernizing the narrative on how disability is discussed.”*

➤➤➤ [Read more about DOR’s proposed name change](#)

➤➤➤ [Read more about social, diagnostic, legislative, and advocacy history of developmental disabilities](#)

➤➤➤ [Read more about respectful disability language from:](#)

- [Special Olympics](#)
- [ADA National Network](#)
- [National Youth Leadership Network](#)

**1974:**

Advocates with developmental disabilities form a new organization “People First”, pushing back against harmful labels

**1993:**

Federal law recognizes disability as a natural part of human experience, that does not diminish rights of those with disabilities

**2010:**

“Intellectual disability” replaces “mental retardation” in all federal documents

**2013:**

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) adopts the term “intellectual disability”



# Resource Spotlight: College Autism Network



[Watch to learn about CAN](#)

The College Autism Network (CAN), founded in 2014, is a non-profit organization focused on supporting professionals and their work to improve access, experiences, and outcomes for autistic college students. CAN offers a number of resources for postsecondary educators to deepen their knowledge of best practices.



## CANVAS

A community for professionals that hosts a listserv and webinars - topics span from accommodations/supports, mental health, career pathways, campus neurodiversity culture, and academics.

[>>> Learn more and join the community here.](#)

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## College Autism Summit



A yearly in-person conference hosted by CAN. The Summit host scholars, professionals, and self-advocates to discuss research and support interventions for autistic college students with autism and other related disabilities.

[>>> Register for 2024](#)



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## CAN Newsletter

Read monthly updates about the initiatives CAN provides and supports.

[>>> Read Now](#)



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## Autism-Specific College Support Program Database

A free tool to help prospective college students and their families identify programs that match their postsecondary education needs.

[>>> View the Database](#)



# Belonging for College Students with Intellectual Disability



*This story was contributed by Emily Frake, MA, a doctoral student in Special Education at UCLA. Emily's research interests straddle special education and disability studies, with a focus on inclusive education at the college level. Emily shares below about her dissertation study.*

Belonging is a universal human need, regardless of disability. **We ALL want to belong.** Conceived of by Drs. Erik Carter and Elizabeth Biggs, the 10 Dimensions of Belonging can be used to reflect upon inclusion for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD). In this model, students belong when they are “present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, involved, supported, heard, befriended, and needed”. [Learn more about these dimensions of belonging here.](#) In my own research, I’ve explored the extent to which students with IDD in specialized inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs at 4-year universities felt they belonged. After interviewing and visiting college students with IDD across the U.S., a few things have stuck out.

Overall, students are proud and happy to be college students at their respective universities. Students reported experiences related to each of the ten dimensions of belonging, including “needed,” the 10th (and often most elusive) dimension - sharing that they were missed by their classmates, teammates, coaches, and professors when they were absent from a class or sports practice.

However, when probed about negative experiences as a college student, nearly every student mentioned “the drama” among their cohort of IPSE peers.



*Continued on  
the next page*

Carter, E. W., & Biggs, E. E. (2021). Creating communities of belonging for students with significant cognitive disabilities (Belonging Series). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, TIES Center.

# Belonging for College Students with Intellectual Disability

Whether it was an argument over who was hosting a party or rumors about who was dating who, students overwhelmingly mentioned that “drama” made them feel excluded. Additionally, a lack of reciprocal relationships between college students with and without IDD was noted through observation and corroborated through student interviews. One student aptly stated, *“And you know, it’s funny because I call them friends, but a real friend is someone who checks up on you, too. Not just when they see you in-person and say, ‘hey.’”* While some students with IDD yearned for more connection and authentic friendships with their non-disabled peers, others were content with their current friendships.

To close out, I want to share practices identified in this research that college students with IDD experienced as helpful in building belonging on campus.

- 1 Dedicated disability spaces** on campus for students with IDD to find community. This could be classes, clubs, or disability cultural centers.
- 2 Peer mentor programs** in which nondisabled college students are paired with students with IDD to support social inclusion and skills, independence, academic success, and more.
- 3 Soliciting student voice** - “Nothing about us, without us!”

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