

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.

Autism CARES Act Becomes Law



This article was co-authored by Holly Oliver, UCLA Tarjan Center's Disability Rights Advocate



[Watch Holly's presentation about the Autism CARES Act](#)

On December 23rd, 2024, President Joe Biden signed the Autism Collaboration, Accountability, Research, Education and Support (CARES) Act into law. The 2024 law is a reauthorization and expansion of the 2019 law. The bill was introduced by U.S. Senator Rep. Christopher Smith (R-NJ) and co-sponsored by 60 House of Representative members. Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) sponsored the bill in the Senate.

Since 2006 when the first iteration of the act became law, the [NIH](#), [CDC](#), and [HRSA](#) have dedicated more than 3.1 billion dollars to autism initiatives and research, and training programs have educated [approximately 22,000 interdisciplinary health professionals](#) in autism screening, referrals, and services to bridge healthcare gaps and reduce disparities. Interagency coordinating efforts and [strategic planning](#) have been supported. The 2024 reauthorization will continue this funding by supplying more than 1.95 billion dollars for the next five years. As the only law dedicating significant funding in autism research and education, its reauthorization was celebrated by the autism community.

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Autism CARES Act Becomes Law

Holly Oliver, UCLA Tarjan Center's Disability Rights Advocate, indicated that she has benefited from research-based programs enabling her to graduate from college successfully. Holly said, "Many of my peers are underemployed, stuck in low-paying jobs in factories or stores, not working up to their potential, or maybe unemployed. Targeted education and interventions could take them to greater heights and unleash a better quality of life." This vision is supported by the new language in the bill, which includes a focus on the following:

- "Across the lifespan" added throughout language related to research, workforce development, and need for strategic services and supports - reflecting consistent attention to the needs of autistic adults

Autism across the Lifespan

- Requires systematic information gathering and reporting on challenges in the transition to adulthood for autistic individuals
- Focus on transition from high school services to adult service systems, such as colleges or vocational rehabilitation

Transition to Adulthood

Communication & Cognitive Needs

- Adds "communication needs" as an area of investigation
- Calls for research, services, and reporting activities to reflect the "full range" of cognitive, communicative, behavioral and adaptive functioning of autistic people.

Workforce Development

- Expansion of Leadership and Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (LEND) programs for graduate students across disciplines
- Strategic planning to increase training of developmental behavioral pediatricians

➤➤➤ [Attend public meetings and give input via the Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee](#)

➤➤➤ [Read news announcements and press releases highlighting the Autism CARES Act](#)

A Step Forward for Disability Studies at UCLA

Since 2007, UCLA has offered a minor in Disability Studies, providing students with the opportunity to delve into disability history, contemporary issues, and various models of disability, including medical, social, and biopsychosocial perspectives. The program also addresses manifestations of ableism and strategies to combat it. Starting in Fall 2023, UCLA expanded its offerings to include a Disability Studies major—the first of its kind at any University of California campus. Learn more about the [department](#) and the [major requirements](#). Read [news coverage](#). Meet the faculty and hear their thoughts on Disability studies in [this video](#).



This expansion is coupled with a bigger movement within the department to offer greater cross-disciplinary collaboration and community engagement, allowing students to pursue interdisciplinary interests connected to the field of disability studies. Dr. Lauren Clark, Shapiro Family Endowed Chair in Developmental Disability Studies in Nursing, also emphasized this. “Immediately I saw myself as taking part in

exactly that interdisciplinary, cross disciplinary dialogue that is central to disability studies on campus.” Her class, Care Work: Disability Justice and Health Care, explores the various care networks that are a part of helping people with disabilities live a meaningful life. The class also includes a community engagement component, where students are paired with someone with a disability and learn about their healthcare experiences.

Students are enthusiastic about Disability Studies, with growing numbers of graduates from the minor each year. The major expects to celebrate its first graduates this June.

“The classes in the program are super engaging and interesting. I have learned about the difference between the social model and medical model of disability, how ableism connects to our societal structure, and about different sub-groups within the disabled community.”
- Disability Studies Student

“It is an important major because it encompasses so many different fields and future careers. Almost every career that someone has could utilize disability studies within it.”
- Disability Studies Student

A Step Forward for Disability Studies at UCLA

A Closer Course Look: *Perspectives on Autism and Neurodiversity*

This winter, UCLA's Disability Studies Department and the Tarjan Center offered a new course for undergraduate students titled "*Perspectives on Autism and Neurodiversity*." The class, co-led by Dr. Maya Ayoub, a clinical instructor in child neurology, Russell Lehmann, an internationally recognized autistic self-advocate, motivational speaker, and poet, and Dr. Yasamin Bolourian, the Director of Outreach and Dissemination at the UCLA Tarjan Center, is designed to provide students with both academic knowledge on autism and experiential learning from self-advocates, community leaders, and professionals in the field. Through a partnership with UCLA's Center for Community Engagement, students will partner with organizations like The Help Group, which runs inclusive schools for autistic students, and The

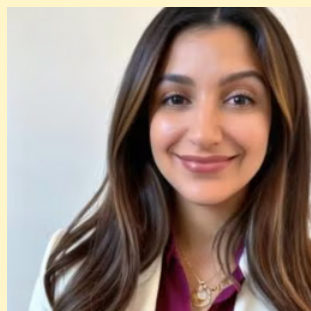
Miracle Project, an arts-based program for neurodivergent individuals. "[This class presents] an exciting time for learning. It's also rewarding to present this topic early and engage them in these conversations while connecting them with the community outside UCLA,"



**Maya
Ayoub, MD**
Co-Instructor



**Russell
Lehmann**
Co-Instructor



**Yasamin
Bolourian, PhD**
Co-Instructor

Ayoub said. Speaking about the course, Russell shared that "the main goal is to reframe people's attitudes and understanding of what it means to have autism, a disability, or to be neurodivergent. Think of it this way: If you go on a hike and you see a strange, unusual flower, it's easy to call it beautiful. So I think if you are somebody who wants to challenge your perspective on the world and is interested in finding beauty in the multitude of human expression, this class is for you." Indeed, that message resonated with students. In its very first quarter, the class reached enrollment capacity and had a full waitlist, showcasing demand and interest. Although the process can be lengthy, Dr. Bolourian encourages other colleges to consider investing in disability studies at their school. One option to explore is collaborating with existing campus departments to incorporate disability-focused curricula as options to fulfill certificate and degree requirements.



Research Insights:

The power of peer mentorship for autistic students

More autistic students are enrolling in college; however, data still show they are struggling academically and psychosocially. Peer mentorship has the potential to strengthen autistic student success. A [review paper](#) consolidated research on peer mentorship for autistic students in college settings to identify common features and benefits, but also highlighted the need for more rigorous evaluation of these programs to confidently assess outcomes.

Core Features of Peer Mentorship Programs for Autistic Students



- Mentors are often fellow students with more experience in college
- Mentors are provided training and/or supervision from staff
- Programs involve a mix of both individual meetings and group events, with group events often being more social in nature
- One to two semester commitment
- Mentoring aims to support academics, social, and well-being
- Focus on relationship building
- Mentoring as a proactive support



Outcomes of Peer Mentoring Seen in Research

- Studies measured different outcomes, and sometimes had different results. Some themes across multiple studies include:
 - High satisfaction among autistic students and mentors
 - Positive mentor-mentee relationships
 - Improved social communication
 - Increased campus inclusion, belonging, and/or friendships
 - Gains in academic areas, including study skills and grades
- Autistic students particularly valued:

“the individualized and flexible nature of the relationship”



[Duerksen, K., Besney, R., Ames, M., & McMorris, C. A. \(2021\). Supporting autistic adults in postsecondary settings: A systematic review of peer mentorship programs. *Autism in Adulthood*, 3\(1\), 85-99.](#)

Community Partners: AbilityFirst

Postsecondary education professionals can be an invaluable source of information and referrals for college students, helping students navigate where to go for their needs. For students with developmental disabilities in California, Regional Centers and Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) are two important systems to know. Both vendor with local programs that provide specific services to adults with disabilities. These vendored programs can be critical partners for colleges by building student skills and reducing barriers to learning.

AbilityFirst is one example of how these community partnerships can support students and the colleges who serve them. A Regional Center vendor, AbilityFirst collaborates with the Disabled Students Program & Services (DSPS) offices at colleges across Los Angeles County. Ryan Perry, an Assistive Technology Specialist at Pasadena City College, shared, “AbilityFirst has been one of our most consistent and valued partners in supporting student success in the classroom. Their coaches are exceptional, and Nicole and her team consistently go above and beyond.” AbilityFirst Educational Coaches can provide more than what is typically offered through DSPS, such as:

- Executive functioning and organizational supports
- In-class and on-campus assistance
- Skills for building independence in classroom and community
- Support in accessing college and community resources

The students feel the benefits too. At Pasadena City College, an AbilityFirst student said the program, “has helped me become more successful by helping me stay on task and helping me connect with resources like the tutoring center.” Another student expressed that they, “like how this program gave me the opportunity to make new friends. It also gave me a better understanding with what it means to be an adult and how to be independent.”

➤➤➤ [Learn more about AbilityFirst and the colleges they work with](#)

➤➤➤ [Learn what Regional Center serves your college’s area](#)



Special Olympics: A Global Sports Movement for Inclusion

Special Olympics is an international sports organization for people of all ages with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to compete in year-round recreational and competitive sports. Special Olympics is a separate organization from the Paralympics and there are no criteria like time or speed for an athlete to compete.

The organization started in 1962 as a summer camp for children with IDD in Eunice Kennedy Shriver's backyard. Shriver's vision to give children who were treated unjustly a place to be included in sports and physical activities still exists today through their mission to instill fitness, courage, and joy through physical activities.

Today, one important Special Olympics initiative is Unified Sports, where teams of athletes with and without IDD practice and play together on the same team to support social inclusion. Many Unified Sports teams are housed within schools - at all levels of education. In a global survey, Unified Sports participants with and without IDD reported greater social communication, health, and friendships - as well as a desire to play again. Beyond sports, Special Olympics focuses on health, education, and community building to promote the social participation and inclusion of people with IDD.

The 2025 Special Olympics World Winter Games



In March, Special Olympics hosted the 2025 World Winter Games in Turin, Italy. In sum, 1,422 athletes competed in eight different winter sports, including alpine skiing, cross country skiing, dance, figure skating, floorball, speed skating, snowboarding, and snowshoeing.

➤➤➤ [Learn more about the history of Special Olympics](#)

➤➤➤ [Learn more about Special Olympics today](#)

➤➤➤ [Learn more about Unified Sports](#)

➤➤➤ [Watch the full ESPN/ABC Recap of the 2025 Winter World Games](#)

The Special Olympics: A Global Sports Movement for Inclusion

Feeling inspired?

Special Olympics offers a wealth of resources that colleges can use and share:

1

Special Olympics College Programming. Learn about becoming a Unified Champion school and access resource guides for starting college clubs, intramural sports, and hosting events.

2

Coaching guides (and sport specific coaching guides) that can be used by instructors teaching inclusive fitness and physical education courses, including strategies for increasing inclusion and addressing common barriers to learning.

3

Free online learning portal for volunteers, coaches, healthcare providers - including a 3 hour training on inclusive health fundamentals for people with IDD that can be incorporated into courses training the next generation of providers.

4

Accessible health resources for students with IDD, such as the MyHealth Online Hub, inclusive fitness & strength training videos, and free health screenings for athletes - including dental, vision, and hearing - at community events.



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