

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 in the News: Exploring the Evidence

Over the past few months, autism has been a topic of discussion in the news. Some comments have suggested causes and cures that are not grounded in science, and others have portrayed the autism community in ways that felt stigmatizing and harmful. Understandably, many may be feeling confused, discouraged, or hurt by this rhetoric. At the Tarjan Center, we remain steadfast in our commitment to evidence-based practice and the creation of neuroinclusive schools, workplaces, and communities. Your dedication, compassion, and professionalism ensure that students know they are valued and respected for who they are. We have compiled resources that share more context on current state of the science below.

- [Read statements about autism, vaccines, acetaminophen, and Leucovorin from a joint coalition of medical and health groups, American Academy of Pediatrics, Coalition of Autism Scientists, and Autism Science Foundation](#)
- [Original research article: Vaccines are not associated with autism: An evidence-based meta-analysis of case-control and cohort studies](#)
- [Original research article: Acetaminophen use during pregnancy and children's risk of autism, ADHD, and intellectual disability](#)

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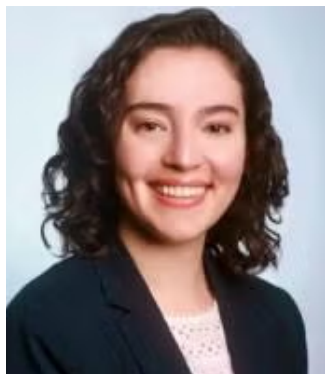
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Reflections with Dr. Samara Wolpe:

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Samara Wolpe, PhD, is a neuro-affirming researcher and clinician focused on the transition into adulthood and supporting quality of life in autistic adults. Her research uses wisdom from lived experience to promote success in autistic adults' goals for their own lives. Currently, Dr. Wolpe is a postdoctoral fellow at the UCLA Tarjan Center. She sat down with us to talk about lessons learned from her research speaking to autistic adults.

Q: What does the data tell us are some barriers to success for autistic college students?

Just as a baseline, colleges aren't really designed to be accessible for neurodivergent students. One barrier is navigating Disability Services - you need a bunch of paperwork and self-advocacy skills that aren't taught. Disability Services also often asks what accommodations you want, which is hard to know if you've never been in college before or don't know what's possible. If you get accommodations, there's a stigma in disclosing to professors and TAs every time you start a new class, and they may or may not respect your accommodations. And most accommodations are centered around other disabilities, rather than addressing the core needs of autistic students, such as sensory-specific accommodations like lower lighting or noise-canceling headphones.

Q: What have autistic students found helpful in supporting their holistic success in college?

I love this question, because it's wonderful to look at what the autistic person themselves found helpful. The biggest things that came across in interviews were self-acceptance and learning to challenge internalized ableism and stigma. Participating in self-advocacy was crucial but also having a safe neurodivergent community to unmask and put down the burden of advocacy. Meeting autistic people in higher education that they can admire or look up to was huge, because many autistic people grow up without positive autistic role models. In terms of academic success, having a point person who regularly monitors their well-being - not just checking if they're finishing homework, but asking: Are they doing self-care? Are they managing their workload? Are they eating regularly? They want independence, while still having a safety net of support.

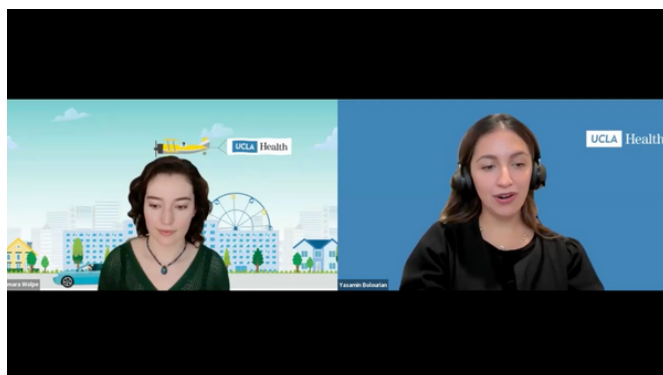
Q: What are some success stories you've heard in your research?

I always share the findings with the participants to make sure they're comfortable with what is coming out from the study. Through that, I've kept up with participants and heard updates. One participant who I interviewed was an undergraduate at the time, and is now a PhD student studying autism. Another participant, who was living with a partner at the time I interviewed him, is now married. He had a giant, amazing wedding at a venue relating to their special interest as a couple and it was absolutely beautiful. A lot of the success they found was through relationships - finding an affirming partner, finding an PhD advisor that was encouraging of their learning style and interests.

Reflections with Dr. Samara Wolpe: An Exclusive Interview

Q: Based on your research, what are some ideas you have for how professors and college instructors can create more inclusive learning environments?

It's wonderful that professors are becoming aware and wanting to work towards this. Universal design principles are so powerful – for example, for finals, we can offer a menu of a test, an essay, or a video presentation. This takes a lot of accommodations out of the picture because you don't need extra time for testing if you're not taking a test. Instructors can also be open to offering “open” accommodations themselves - this reduces the burden of disclosure and providing proof. Tell the class, if XYZ would be helpful for you, just tell me. I think a lot of the time the thought process is, “we don't want to just give accommodations away, because people will take advantage.” And to that I say, accommodations aren't helpful to people who don't need them. It's not helpful to have a quiet room unless you need a quiet room. For unwritten social expectations, first, present students with clearer, explicit instruction on the social curriculum. At the same time, recognize that many unwritten social rules are constructed over time but aren't really necessary. For instance, some email etiquette is important, but instructors can also be ok and not take offense if it's not perfect.



[Watch Dr. Wolpe's recent webinar
on Navigating the Transition to
Adulthood](#)

Q: Thinking next about student disability offices and the formal accommodation process in college, what are autistic adults looking for there and how can these processes be improved?

I had a participant who, after getting her autism diagnosis, went to the disability office and was asked what accommodations she wanted. She didn't know, had never been in college before, and found the experience so intimidating that she decided not to enroll. It's so important for disability offices to be the experts and to recognize that what the student is doing is vulnerable and scary. They should metaphorically take the student's hand and guide them through the process. If we can also create ways for these offices to help more with disclosure to professors, instead of putting that burden on the student, that would also be very helpful.

Q: What advice do you have for professionals who want to work on this, but aren't sure how to start or how to keep the momentum going?

First of all, it's natural to not know where to start because it's not traditionally part of postsecondary educator training. And also, these things move slowly - institutions don't change overnight. But every little change matters. Every individual action can make a difference. Seek out training yourself, listen to the perspectives of neurodivergent students, reserve a room and create a sensory friendly break space, be supportive of accommodations, even just smiling at a student and welcoming them.

Resource Spotlight: Autism Self Advocacy Network



Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) is a non-profit organization committed to advancing inclusion and protecting the rights of autistic people. ASAN is run by and for autistic people, and works to advocate through policy-making, accessible educational resources using plain language, and promoting leadership in the autistic community. Particularly relevant to college educators and students is handbook written by and for autistic adults entitled: Navigating College: A Handbook on Self-Advocacy. This resource is one that we often recommend to students, families, and professionals. Read to learn from the perspective of autistic students in college, including the challenges and what has worked for them. See snippets below!

"Remember one thing: you made it to college because you have potential. You are in college because you demonstrated capability to get here."

"Because of the way my disability affects me, I don't already have the structures in my brain that my classmates have to keep themselves organized... So far, I've discovered some tools that I use to keep me on track. I call these tools "prosthetic brain parts" because they prop up the parts of my brain that don't always work as well as I would like."

"Now, when I enter a classroom, I am fully equipped. I have ear plugs in my pocket and I have rehearsed simple phrases to explain their use. I have special pouches filled with pleasant-feeling material, such as silk, so that I can reach into the pouch to feel them when I need something calming."

"How am I able to get professors to work with me? I make sure they know me... I make a habit of talking to a given professor at least once a week, usually for a minute or two after class."

Finals Stress? UDL Can Help!

As finals approach, it's the perfect time to rethink how we measure what students truly know, whether through a test, presentation, paper, or project. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) reminds us that assessments should capture learning goals, not a student's ability to navigate a specific format. Even small changes can help reduce stress and give all students a fair chance to demonstrate what they've learned.



Tips for UDL Finals:



Offer Multiple Ways To Demonstrate Understanding

Consider going beyond traditional timed tests. These options allow students to show mastery in different ways that play to their strengths.

- Let students choose between a paper, presentation, video, or creative project
- Replace a high-stakes final with smaller cumulative assignments throughout the term (when possible)

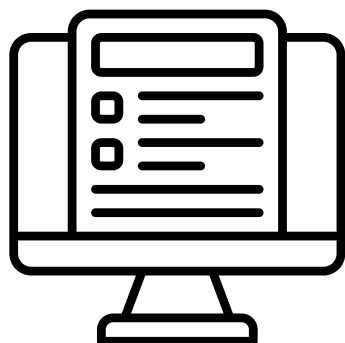
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Clarify Expectations Early and Often

Providing clear expectations and predictability can help reduce nervousness and provide clarity for students.

- Post a detailed grading rubric and sample responses before the exam or final assignment
- Provide a study guide or final project checklist to help students plan
- Share sample questions or exemplars to clarify your expectations

Reduce Barriers Unrelated to Learning Outcomes



- Avoid penalizing spelling or handwriting unless that is part of the learning outcome
- Offer accessible options (e.g., large print, digital submission)
- Ensure instructions are clear and written in plain language
- Consider take home exams if memorizing isn't part of the learning outcome
- If recalling information or producing a response within a time limit is not a critical learning outcome, consider reducing the number of questions to allow all students sufficient time to demonstrate their knowledge fully.

Review Your Finals Through a UDL Lens

Ask yourself: *Does this format give every student an equal chance to show what they know?*

- Pilot instructions or prompts with a colleague or teaching assistant
- Gather anonymous student feedback on clarity or accessibility



UDL does not need to mean a complete redesign of your finals.

It's about intentional reflection and small, meaningful changes that promote equity and inclusion for all learners.

Read more at [UDL on Campus.](#)

Student Stories: Marlon Cuaya



Marlon Cuaya is a neurodivergent student at Moreno Valley College (MVC). Marlon has become an advocate for inclusion on campus, promoting acceptance of neurodiversity and intersectional identities. In the last year, he has formed a Neurodiversity Club at MVC and participated in multiple webinars and events related to this topic. In this piece, he shares about his experiences in college and offers insights into how postsecondary educators can make a difference.

When I first stepped onto my college's campus last year, I carried two things: determination and doubt. Years of being sidelined as a disabled student had left me uncertain if academia could and would ever welcome me. Still, I held onto the belief that I deserved to learn, and, fresh out of high school, I enrolled at my local community college, Moreno Valley College. To my surprise, my first year was transformative. In one year, I joined my school's honors program, conducted and published original research, earned an internship, and took on leadership roles – all while maintaining a near perfect 4.0 GPA. For the first time, I felt belonging and purpose. I began to see myself as someone with a future in higher education.

For all I achieved, however, my first year was not without struggle. During this time, I sat in classrooms that overlooked my needs. I wondered if I belonged in spaces that were not built with me in mind. I had to push through doubt, making room where none was offered. After talking with fellow disabled students, I learned that my experience was unfortunately not uncommon. Many in the community faced the same doubts and barriers, the same struggles to belong that I did. This made me realize that colleges and professionals hold the power to make this path less isolating and more inclusive, if they commit to real change. Inclusion begins with a mindset. A culture that values empathy, understanding, and collaboration across every level of academia. To foster this, colleges and professionals can:

- ✓ • **Recognize and normalize disability as diversity. Value disabled students as contributors to shift the culture from accommodation to inclusion.**
 - *In practice:* Proactively include disability in class lessons, content, or discussions without waiting for someone to mention it. This feels like an acknowledgment that we're part of the space.

Student Stories: Marlon Cuaya

- ✓ • **Welcome different learning styles. Create spaces that support varied ways of processing, engaging, and showing knowledge.**
 - *In practice:* Give multiple ways to participate, like allowing written responses to count as class participation alongside verbal responses or hand-raising. Small things tell students their learning style is valid.
- ✓ • **Respect advocacy. Meet student requests and feedback with support. Show that disabled voices matter.**
 - *In practice:* When I reach out about accommodations and professors reply with, “Thank you for reaching out and sharing this with me, please continue to do so,” it genuinely helps me feel validated. Your responses have the power to make students feel heard and welcome.
- ✓ • **Move past simply being compliant. Create classrooms and campuses that are equitable, affirming, and always improving.**
 - *In practice:* Instructors can ask, “Is this assignment accessible?” or “Would this format work for you?” Just taking that extra step so we, disabled students, don’t always have to be the ones pointing out barriers. Truly listen to disabled students’ concerns and use your position to make even small changes. Those efforts go a long way.

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