

Validating and Improving the College Experience for Autistic and Neurodiverse Students

Drs. Lauren Allen & Noor Syed

Brain Awareness Week

March 17, 2022



1

Goals for Our Conversation

How can we create a supportive, inclusive higher education environment for all students with different levels of support needs, including Autistic and Neurodivergent learners?

What are a few, easily implemented universal design supports that we can begin doing immediately?



2

Importance of Increased Supports

- 32% of Autistic individuals enroll in higher education, compared to 62.7% of all high school graduates
- Graduation rates are lower for Autistic students compared to neurotypical & many other support needs (i.e., ADHD)
- Rate of autism diagnosis is growing; previously 1 in 54, now in 1 in 44

Sources: CDC, 2022; Newman et al., 2021; Hanson, 2021; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021; Wei, 2013



3

Significant Implications Beyond Higher Education

- Estimates suggest that nearly half of Autistic adults in their early 20s are unemployed
- Approximately 80% are employed part-time
- Many are underemployed

Sources: Roux et al., 2015; Shattuck et al., 2012



4

Significant Implications Beyond Higher Education

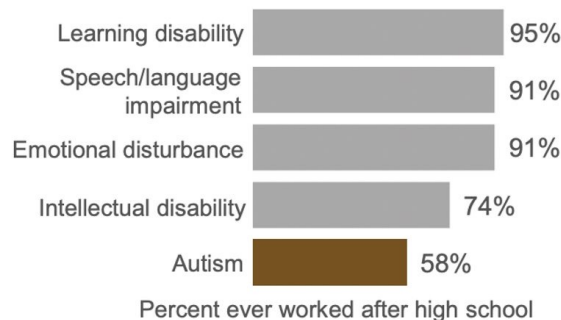
- Lowest rate of employment in young adults (58%) compared to any other type of disability; within this 58% there is a disproportionality--twice as many White adults (66%) worked compared to Black and Hispanic adults (37%/34%).
- 42% of young adults with ASD never worked for pay.
- Job rates continue to decline as autistic adults become older.

Source: Roux et al., 2015



5

In their early 20s, young adults with autism had far lower rates of employment than their peers.



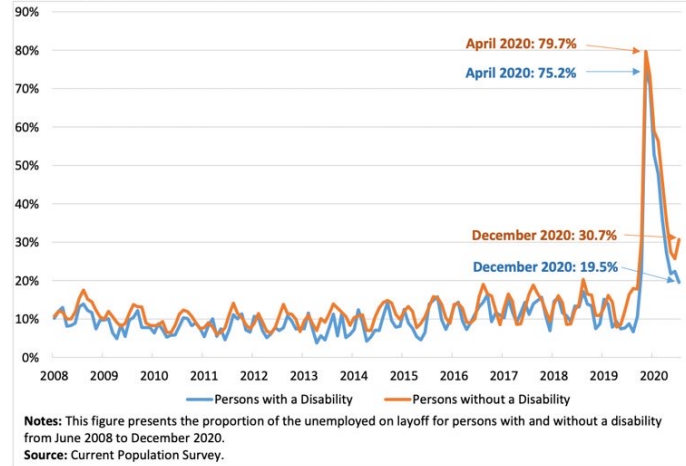
Source: National Longitudinal Transition Study-2



6

Employment of Persons with a Disability: Analysis of Trends during the COVID-19 Pandemic

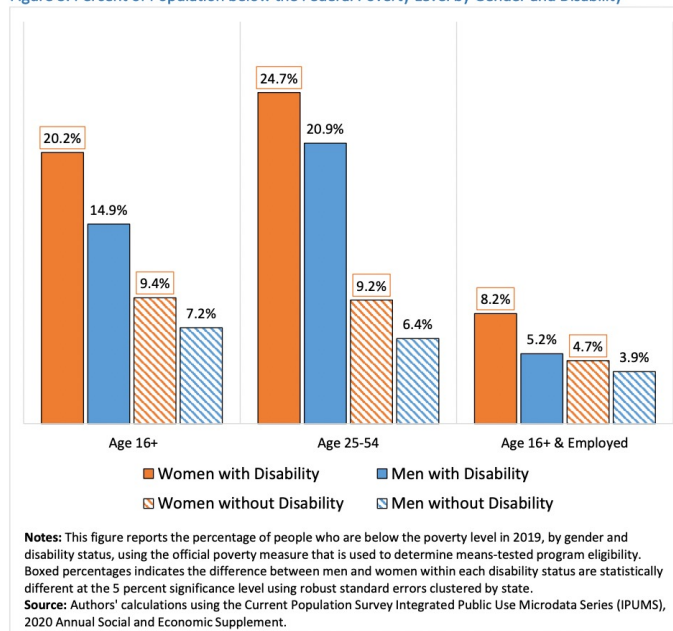
Figure 2. Proportion of the Unemployed on Layoff – Persons with and without a Disability



7

Poverty

Figure 3. Percent of Population below the Federal Poverty Level by Gender and Disability



Source: U.S. Department of Labor

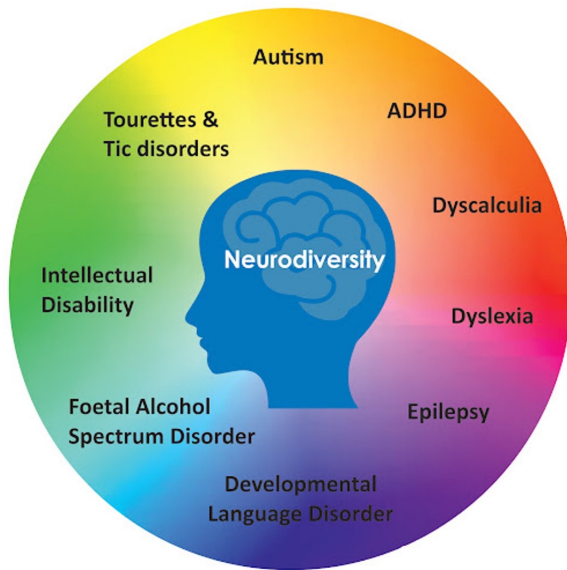


8

Neurodiversity Movement



9



Autism Toolbox Working Group (2019.)

Neurodiversity

"Variations in neurological development and functioning across humans are a natural and valuable part of human variation and therefore not necessarily pathological" (Leadbitter et al., 2021, p. 2)

- Diversity in all brains
- Concept and movement



10

"Disorder or Difference"?

- Difficulties arise at the intersection of "non-standard individual" (p. 2) and an environment that presents challenges (Leadbitter et al., 2021)
- Autism Spectrum Disorder - Traditional view/medical model
- Autism Spectrum Condition - Neurodiversity model advocates for acceptance of neurological variation
 - (Leveto, 2018, p. 3)



11

Person vs. Identity-First Language



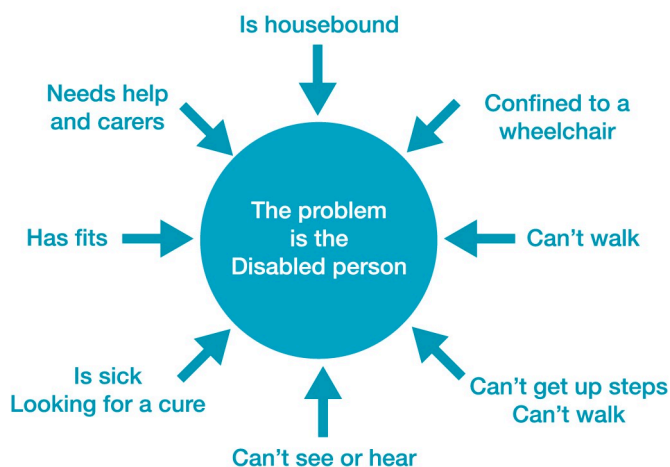
12

Models of Disability & Impact on Inclusive Environments



13

The Medical Model of Disability

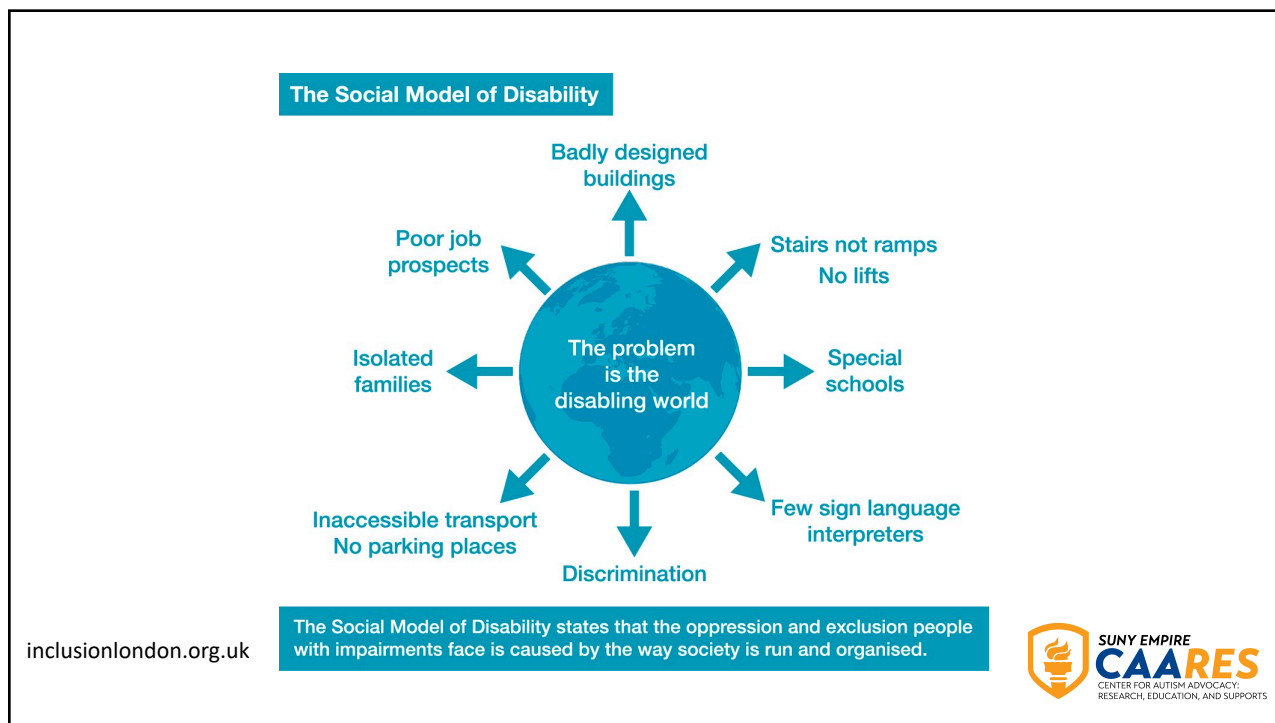


inclusionlondon.org.uk

This is a diagram of the traditional Medical Model of Disability, which the Social Model was developed to challenge.



14



15

Navigating from K-12 to Higher Education in the U.S.

K-12: Under IDEA	Higher Education: Under ADA & Section 504
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free, appropriate public education (FAPE) Multidisciplinary team support Individualized education plans (IEPs) Annual meetings Clear discussion of specialized instruction, accommodation, & related services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protect individuals with disabilities from discrimination Removal of barriers through reasonable accommodations. In higher education, this often requires contacting and disclosing to disability services

Lack of provided individualized support & sudden requirement for self-advocacy.

16

Barriers

- Mental health needs & supports
- Social difficulties such as interactions with peers, faculty, and staff, managing social conflict, and finding ways to make friends
- Academic challenges, such as management of course demands, understanding policies and expectations, writing, and completing group projects
- Self-determination, including goal- and self-regulated behavior; executive functioning, such as time management, organization, daily living responsibilities
- Varied preferences & requirements with self-disclosure

Sources: Davis et al., 2021; Gelbar et al., 2014; Van Hees et al., 2015; White et al., 2016



17

Supports

- Often underutilized – awareness, helpfulness
- Helpful academic supports: Accommodations, priority registration and reduced course load, Universal Design for Learning; Recorded lectures, transcription, and notes; tutoring and writing support
- Helpful non-academic supports: Counseling, peer mentors, disability services support, clubs/support groups
- Preference for individualized consultation
- Less/not helpful supports include group-based skill building trainings (e.g., social skills, executive functioning)

Sources: Accardo et al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2018; Bailey et al., 2019; Barnhill et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2021; Jansen et al., 201; LeGary, 2017; Sarrett, 2018; Van Hees et al., 2015



18

Universal Design Approach & Its Importance



19

Mentor Considerations

- **Share Expectations**
- **Student Survey**
- **Attempt Ongoing Contact**
- **Student Choice in Frequency of Contact**
- **Student Choice in Format of Contact**



20

Mentor Considerations

- **Develop Note-Taking System**
- **Welcome Differences in Communication**
- **Show Grace to Your Students—and Yourself**
- **Maintain High Expectations**



21

Bhawna Sudhir: Student & Parent of Child with Autism

Treats you as an individual

Provides guidance from orientation through graduation

Helps you develop a degree program and conduct a review of your prior learning

Coordinates your work with other faculty



22

Considerations for Autistic and Neurodiverse Students

- Choice and ownership of disclosure; Not all or nothing
- Many services and supports available without disclosure
- Self-advocacy
- Informed consumer



23

Creating an Inclusive Higher Ed Environment



Modify the environment, rather than expecting the person to change



Assume good intentions of others



Strength-based approach and choices



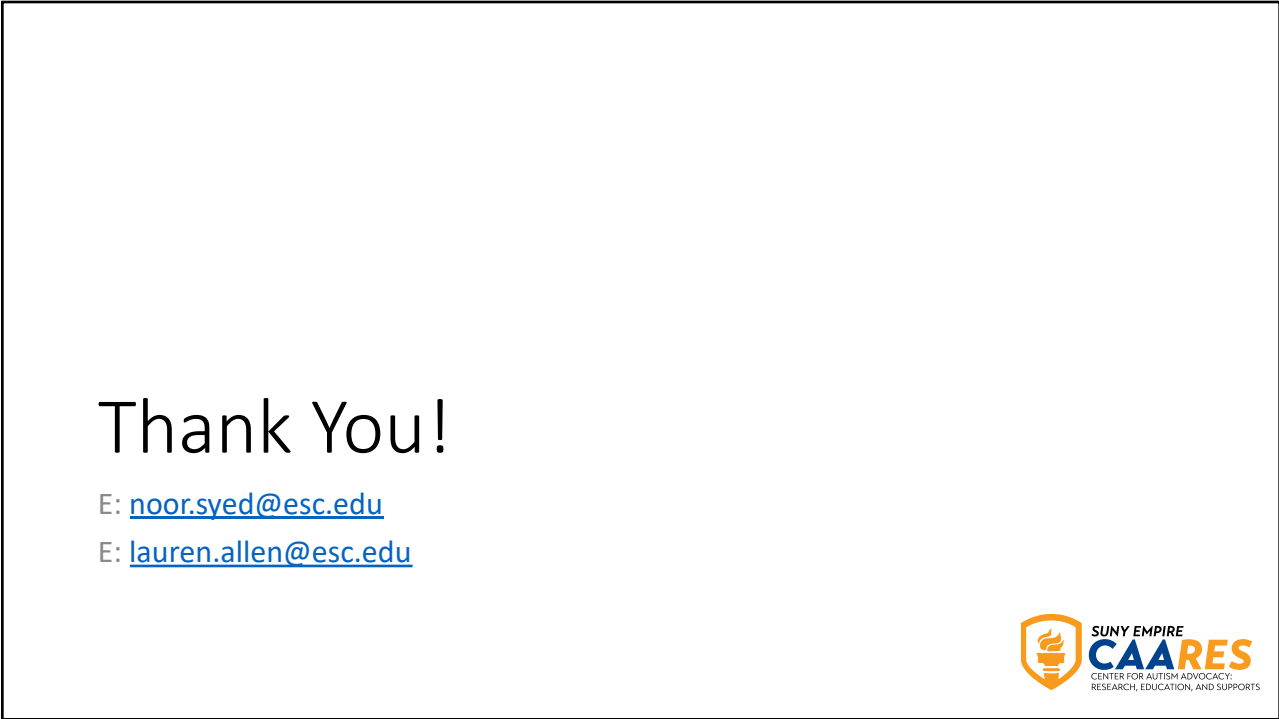
Listening and learning



24



25



26

Thank You for Joining Us Today!



Join our Last Symposium Sessions:

- Today at 4pm, 6pm –Student Success for All Brains, Drug Abuse and the Brain
- For questions about the Brain Awareness Week at SUNY Empire, email brainawareness@esc.edu.

