CONNECT

A STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVE FOR STUDENTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Western Michigan University

Mary Cantor, Nicole Haase, Lizzy Machado, Hilal Saeed

MARY CANTOR
Graduate Assistant,
Leadership Programs

NICOLE HAASE
Operations Supervisor,
Campus Student Union

LIZZY MACHADO
Graduate Assistant, Office
of Institutional
Effectiveness

HILAL SAEED
Fulbright Scholar from
Afghanistan

Our Vision, Purpose, and Goal

- **Our vision** is that the CONNECT initiative will serve as a way to make our campus inclusive for students who identify on the autism spectrum. In addition, this initiative will serve as a template to expand our institutional commitment to eliminate barriers at every level of our campus environment and transform our campus to be inclusive of all student identities.

- **Our purpose** is to present the template for an initiative that will synthesize our resources and services on campus to meet the needs of students with autism. This initiative will be called CONNECT in the spirit of our goal to connect students with autism to our campus and holistically address their needs to succeed academically, personally, and socially.

- **Our goal** is to use the framework of transition theory, the methodology of the ecological approach, and the principles of universal design to design an initiative that can be expanded to transform our university into an institution where all programs, structures, and policies are aligned so every student feels a sense belonging and connection.

Agenda

Background

Student Characteristics and Needs

Current Climate

Peer Institutions

Theory

Initiative Design

Next Steps

Who is our student population?

An estimated 1 in 68 (14.6 per 1,000) school-aged children have been identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). (CDC, 2016)

"between 1 in 130 and 1 in 53 college students likely meet criteria for HFASD" (White et. al, 2011)

"growing numbers of people with disabilities enrolling at institutions of higher education, now estimated to be 11% of all undergraduates (Burgstahler, 2015)

Identified Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder
ADDM Network 2000 – 2012

Surveillance Year	Birth Year	Number of ADDM Sites Reporting	Prevalence per 1,000 Children (Range)	This is about 1 in X children...
2000	1992	6	6.7 (4.5 – 9.9)	1 in 150
2002	1994	14	6.6 (3.3 – 10.6)	1 in 150
2004	1996	8	8.0 (4.6 – 9.8)	1 in 125
2006	1998	11	9.0 (4.2 – 12.1)	1 in 110
2008	2000	14	11.3 (4.8 – 21.2)	1 in 88
2010	2002	11	14.7 (5.7 – 21.9)	1 in 68
2012	2004	11	14.6 (8.2 – 24.6)	1 in 68

This student population is increasing and many of these students are intellectually capable of participating in college and want to go to post secondary education.

Student Characteristics and Needs

Of students who did choose to disclose their disability to the postsecondary school, 42% received help, accommodations or services to support their education. (Roux et al, 2015)

28% of young adults with autism who are unemployed and not in school, did not receive services, which could have helped them become employed. (Shattuck & Roux, 2015)

What happened to young adults with autism between high school and their early 20s?

Education
Attended any postsecondary education
36%

Living Arrangements
Lived independently
19%

Employment
Had a job for pay
58%

Access to Services
Received any services
74%

National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into Young Adulthood. A.J. Drexel Autism Institute's Life Course Outcomes Research Program, 2015. drexe.lu/autismindicators

Many students with autism do not seek or gain entry into college, or they drop out due to social isolation, difficulty with changing routines and new schedules, problems with living independently away from home, and lack of external monitoring and guidance. (Howlin et al, 2004; Jobe & White, 2007)

Adults with autism represent a consistently growing population and, compared to adults with other disabilities, are among the costliest to serve (Cimera & Cowan, 2009)

As the population of individuals who are diagnosed with autism continues to rise, we can expect the population of individuals wanting to pursue postsecondary education to rise as well.

Legal Mandates for Institutions:
Our responsibility to students with disabilities

| The Americans with Disabilities Act ([ADA], 1990)	Section 504C of the Rehabilitation Act (1973)
"entitles students with a documented disability to reasonable accommodations set by law" (Longtin, 2014)	"guarantees that a student with a disability will have equal access to all educational programs, services, facilities, and activities. The legal requirement is that the student will not be excluded from participation in any aspect of college life. " (Longtin, 2014)

Current Campus Climate

- There is a significant increase of students on the autism spectrum attending our institution and our current services do not meet their needs
- We need to address the academic, interpersonal, and emotional needs of these students as they transition through college
- We have set-up a committee comprised of the director of disability services, an individual from residence life, a faculty member, someone from the office of student activities, and a representative from mental health services
  - Other stakeholders to consider: Self-identifying student on the autism spectrum, community member, alumni who identify on the autism spectrum, family members of students with autism
  - The committee will provide assistance and advice in the development of the CONNECT initiative

Consequences of Not Meeting This Need
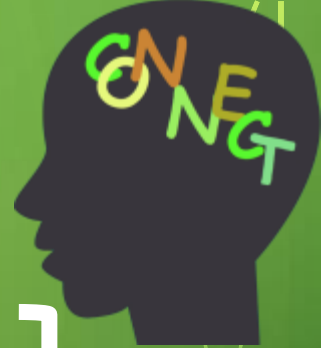
Societal
Disengaged citizenship, lack of community awareness, reduced accessibility and inclusion of community, services and resources, unmet human potential, loss of productivity, neglect of an ethical obligation

Institutional
Loss of diversity and cross cultural understanding, negative impact on campus climate, failure to recruit and retain students, damaging institutional reputation, and legal ramifications of non-compliance

Personal
Diminished sense of independence, reduced engagement and goal setting, undeveloped interpersonal relationships, expression, and self advocacy

Peer Institutions

University of Connecticut

- [REACHing Peers](#)- Incorporates a three-fold mentoring program (prospective student/current student, mentor/mentee both current students, current students/alumni)

Syracuse University

- [Project SEARCH](#)- Provides vocational training & internship rotations to prepare students to attain sustainable & competitive community employment

University of Alabama

- [UA-ACTS](#)- Supports students in academics, social & daily living skills, emotional/psychological well-being, meet with therapist/mentor three times per week

Connecting the pieces:
The CONNECT Initiative

Details of our plan

Theories we are using:

Transition Theory: Framework for service provision

Ecology Approach: Methodology for assessment of campus

Universal Design Approach: Strategy/vision for implementation

Initiative Design

Budget

Transition Theory:
The Process and Application

Transition theory: "a way to analyze human adaptation to transition" (Evans et. al, 2010, p.213)

Transition: "any event, or nonevent, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Evans et. al, 2010, p. 215)

Variables to Adaptation	Process	Application
● perception of the transition ● characteristics of the pre-transition and post-transition environments ● characteristics of the agent experiencing the transition	Factors that influence an agent's ability to cope with transitions: ● situation ● self ● support ● strategies	● provide specialized services ● education ● advocacy ● a clearinghouse ● referrals ● program planning ● networking and mentoring ● counseling

Transition Theory:
Our Recommendation

We recommend using Transition Theory as the framework for understanding the unique stressors associated with the multiple transitions students with autism undergo and at what level and area to address those transitional needs

Transitional theory can also be used at the institutional level to understand how the university as a whole will adapt to meet the needs of an ever increasingly diverse student body

Ecology Approach

Approach

"a way of looking at the interaction and interdependence of humans (as individuals, groups, and societies) with the environment"
(Evans et. al, 2010, p. 159)

The ecological approach emphasizes the interaction between individuals and the environment by maintaining individual outcomes are the result of the interaction of person and their environment

The university is, and is a part of, complex social ecosystems. The goal of the ecosystem is survival which is accomplished through adaptation.

Components

"Ecology includes four components that interact to promote or inhibit development:

1. **Process:** forms of interaction between student and environment that operate over time and produce development
2. **Person:** individual characteristics influence how a student will experience and environment and how the environment will respond to the individual
3. **Context:** the student develops through processes that occur in context and over time. there are four components to context; Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, and Macrosystem:
4. **Time:** occurs at different levels and interacts with process, person, and context to affect development"
(Evans et. al, 2010, p. 165)

Ecology Approach: Our Recommendation

We recommend the university conduct a campus ecology survey which would determine resources, services, policies, and perceptions regarding students with autism at every level of the campus ecology. This would help the committee identify barriers to student development and create action plans to eliminate barriers to personal, social, and academic success.
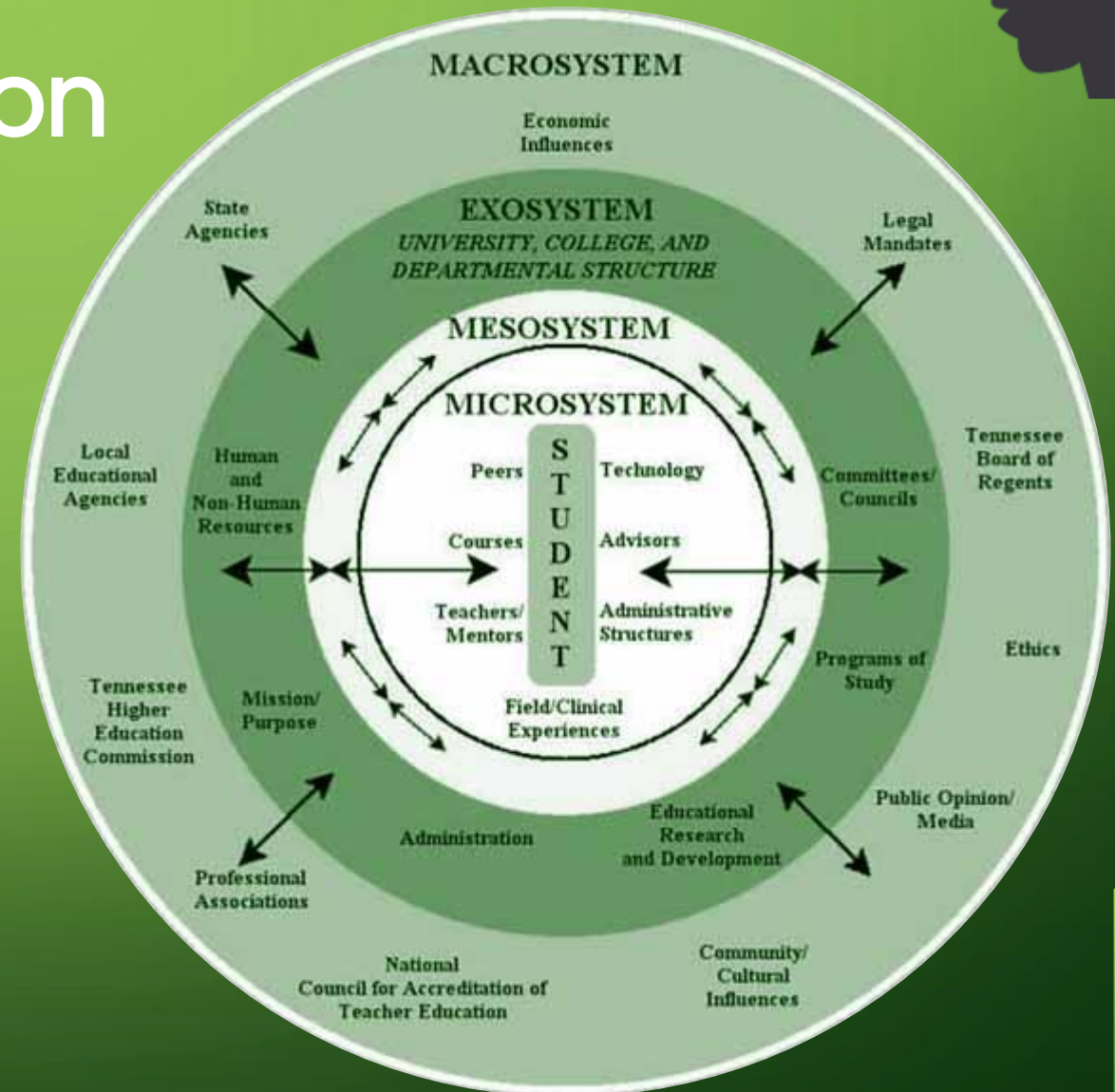
Universal Design: Principles and Process

Principles

1. "Equitable use: The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities
2. Flexibility in Use: The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities
3. Simple and intuitive: Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level.
4. Perceptible information: The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.
5. Tolerance for error: The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.
6. Low physical effort: The design can be used efficiently, comfortably, and with a minimum of fatigue
7. Size and space for approach and use: Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of the user's body size, posture, or mobility" (Aslaksen, et. al, 1997)

Process

1. "Identify the application
2. Define the universe: Describe the overall population.
3. Involve consumers
4. Adopt guidelines or standards: Create or select existing universal design guidelines/standards. Integrate them with other best practices within the field of the specific application
5. Apply guidelines or standards
6. Plan for accommodations: Develop processes to address accommodation requests
7. Train and support: Tailor and deliver ongoing training and support to stakeholders. Share institutional goals with respect to diversity and inclusion and practices for ensuring welcoming, accessible, and inclusive experiences for everyone
8. Evaluate: Include universal design measures in periodic evaluations of the application, evaluate the application with a diverse group of users, and make modifications based on feedback. Provide ways to collect input from users (e.g., through online and printed instruments and communications with staff)" (Aslaksen, et. al, 1997)

Universal Design: Our Recommendation

Using the framework of Transition Theory and the methodology of the Ecological Approach, we recommend using the philosophy of Universal Design to guide our initiative and all future university initiatives. It aligns with our institutional goals to adapt our university and practices to meet the needs of the greatest number of students. The approach of universal design will not only shape the experiences of current students but generations of students, faculty, staff, and families to come.

"The application of UD to educational products and environments makes them welcoming and accessible to and usable by students with a broad range of characteristics, including disabilities." (Burgstahler, S., & Russo-Gleicher, R. J., 2015, p. 201)

Implementing the CONNECT Initiative

Step One
- Create a committee of stakeholders and identify missing perspectives
- Create a shared understanding and awareness about students with autism

Step Two
- Create a shared understanding regarding aspects of the student transition and institutional transition using Transition Theory

Step Three
- Conduct a Campus Ecology Survey using the Ecology Approach.
  - What are the number of students with autism attending our institution?
  - What are their experiences at various levels of our community?
    - Personal (their day to day living)
    - Social
    - Academic

Implementing the CONNECT Initiative

Step Four

- Use understandings of student and institutional transitions and the insights gained from the Ecology Survey to create The CONNECT Initiative
- CONNECT will be located in Disabilities Services and administered by that office
- CONNECT will be a one stop shop providing resources, referrals, and services to address the three identified areas of need for students on the autism spectrum; personal, social, and academic
- Training and programming will take place in each category to holistically address the needs of these students and provide them with the opportunities and resources to fully engage with the campus community
- Faculty, staff, and students will receive training for teaching, advising, and mentoring students with autism

Components of the CONNECT Initiative

Personal

- Summer bridge program for students who identify with autism: students will receive personal coaching to organize their time and academic schedules
- Self advocacy training
- Help each student create a college transition toolkit
- School year: CONNECT staff will assist students in creating a semesterly action plan with academic, personal, and social goals and objectives
- Online campus and community resource guide and daily living tutorials
- Hard copy resource guides located within a one-stop shop at disability services
- Mentorship of students on the autism spectrum from upper class students on the spectrum and allies

Social

- Recruit student leaders/mentors/interns to coordinate social outings and activities
- Peer social support group
- Raise awareness of autism on campus through 1 fundraising event per semester
- Create a student organization that will meet weekly and feature workshops led by professionals across campus and various functional areas
- Career services opportunities and 1:1 interactions with employers from autism friendly organizations
- Interpersonal effectiveness training
- Strategic familial involvement

Academic

- Create a universal design workshop for faculty and teach them how to improve their pedagogy and design universally accessible curriculums
- Provide specific tutoring opportunities for students with autism led by trained peers
- Provide specific training for group work to students with autism
- Train academic advising staff on the specific needs of students with autism and how to best serve this population
- Implement weekly study tables in the library for students to come and complete academic work while building community
- Increase structural support of faculty and incentives to adopt these teaching practices

Budget Considerations

No budget/very limited

- Form student organization (no cost)
- Put together online resource guide (no cost)
- Facilitate mentorship opportunities (no cost)
- Train student tutors (small cost)
- Self advocacy training (time cost)

Limited budget

- Set up area within Disability Services office with resource guides (print and space cost)
- Weekly workshops put on by various campus functional areas (time and availability cost)
- Summer bridge program (program administration costs)

Ideal/unlimited budget

- Full time staff member(s) dedicated to CONNECT initiatives
- CONNECT center on campus
- Monthly social and community events for students to participate in
- Semesterly workshops for faculty and staff

Benefits and Limitations

Benefits

- Adaptable in terms of both budget and scale/intensity/application

- Potential to increase enrollment, persistence, and retention

Limitations

- Independent culture of higher education may contradict level of assistance needed

- Geared towards specific population with applications towards a rapidly diversifying general population

Expanding the CONNECT Initiative

After successfully launching and sustaining the CONNECT Initiative for 1-2 years the committee will reconvene. They will add more campus and community members for the purpose of creating a 5-year and 10-year plan which would include goals and strategies for engaging the campus and community in efforts to increase inclusivity and universal access for all students.

One of these goals and strategies will be to expand the CONNECT Initiative into the CONNECT Center which will solidify and expand its efforts across campus and into the community.

Strategic Plan

1. Goal One: Increase positive campus climate for students with autism
   1. Objective: Have inclusive university policies
      1. Strategy: Audit university policies and revise to be more inclusive
   2. Objective: Increase faculty knowledge of students with autism and use of Universal Design strategies in classrooms
      1. Strategy: Increase institutional incentives for faculty to adopt principles of Universal Design in their pedagogies
      2. Strategy: Conduct training for faculty to increase awareness and understanding of students with autism
      3. Strategy: Conduct training for faculty on principles of Universal Design and how they can implement those strategies in their classroom
   3. Objective: Increase staff knowledge of students with autism
      1. Strategy: Conduct training for current staff to increase awareness and understanding of students with autism
      2. Strategy: Implement "Working with Diverse Students" training for all new staff
   4. Objective: Increase student knowledge of students with autism
      1. Strategy: Create a student organization
      2. Strategy: Launch the CONNECT Initiative by doing a campus wide event where students, faculty, staff, and community members are encouraged to decorate a puzzle piece that will be added to a mural. Information pamphlets will be distributed at this event to raise awareness and support.
2. Goal Two: Increase retention of students with autism
   1. Objective: Increase student engagement
      1. Strategy: Provide peer mentoring
      2. Strategy: Design a summer bridge program for students with autism and recruit self identifying students with autism to attend
      3. Strategy: Create a student organization that will meet weekly and feature workshops led by professionals across campus and various functional areas
      4. Strategy: Create a website where students can learn more about the CONNECT Initiative and connect with campus resources specific to their needs
   2. Objective: Increase academic support
      1. Strategy: Provide peer tutoring
      2. Strategy: Train academic advising staff on the specific needs of students with autism
      3. Strategy: Help each student create a personalized college transition toolkit with academic resources
3. Goal Three: Expand the CONNECT Initiative to achieve institutional goals of increasing inclusion and retention of all students
   1. Objective: Discover and eliminate barriers to personal, social, and academic success for all students
      1. Strategy: Have committees of stakeholders analyze transitional needs for groups of interest
      2. Strategy: Have committees of stakeholders conduct Campus Ecology Surveys for groups of interest
      3. Strategy: Have committees of stakeholders apply principles of Universal Design to organize campus resources to meet those needs

References
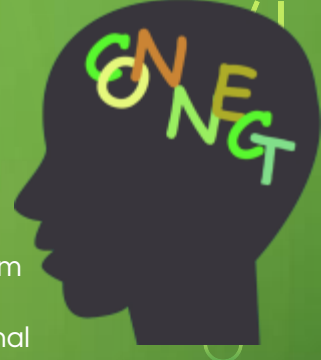
Aslaksen, F., Bergh, S., Rand Bringa, O., & Kristin Heggem, E. (1997). Universal design: Planning and design for all. GLADNET Collection, 1-34. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1329&context=gladnetcollect

Burgstahler, S., & Russo-Gleicher, R. J. (2015). Applying Universal Design to Address the Needs of Postsecondary Students on the Autism Spectrum. Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 28(2), 199-212. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1074670.pdf

CDC, (2016). CDC estimates 1 in 68 school-aged children have autism; no change from previous estimate. *Centers for Disease control and prevention.* Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2016/p0331-children-autism.html

Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). Ecological approaches to college student development. In Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (Authors) Student development in college: theory, research, and practice (2nd ed., pp. 157-175). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). Schlossberg's transition theory. In Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (Authors) *Student development in college: theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed., pp. 212-226). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Longtin, S. E. (2014). Using the College Infrastructure to Support Students on the Autism Spectrum. Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 27(1), 63-72. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1029568.pdf

Roux, A. M., Shattuck, P. T., Rast, J. A., & Anderson, K. A. (2015). National autism indicators report: Transition into young adulthood. *A. J. Drexel Autism Institute,* 1-68. Philadelphia, PA: Life Course Outcomes Research Program.

Scheer, A., Noweski, C., and Meinel, C. (2012). Transforming constructivist learning into action: Design thinking in education. Design and Technology Education: An International Journal, 17(3), 8-19.

Shattuck, P. T., Roux, A. M. (2015). Report: 1 in 3 adults disconnected from work and school. *Autism Speaks.* Retrieved from https://www.autismspeaks.org/blog/2015/04/21/report-1-3-young-adults-disconnected-work-and-school

Syracuse University. (2017). Project SEARCH [Webpage].Retrieved from http://taishoffcenter.syr.edu/projectsearch/

Universal Design: Process, Principles, and Applications. (2015). Published by University of Washington. Retrieved from http://www.washington.edu/doit/universal-design-process-principles-and-applications

University of Alabama. (2009). The University of Alabama, ASD College Transition and Support Program (UA-ACTS) [Webpage]. Retrieved from https://autism-clinic.ua.edu/uaacts/

University of Connecticut. Reaching peers program [Webpage]. Retrieved from http://csd.uconn.edu/reaching-peers-program/

White, S. W., Ollendick, T. H., & Bray, B. C. (2011). College students on the autism spectrum. Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice,, 15(6), 683-701. doi:10.1177/1362361310393363