

T SOCW 533 - MSW CAPSTONE PROJECT
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Square Pegs On Campus

Autism and Inclusion at University of Washington Tacoma

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ABSTRACT

Research findings show Autistic students struggle with communication and social interaction and are at risk of failing and/or dropping out of school. Additionally, the social construct of disability and ableism negatively affect the inclusion of Autistic students. While conducting research that included interviewing UW Tacoma students and staff, I learned there are zero Autistic-specific services, support groups, or Registered Student Organizations (RSOs), and there are more than 29 Autistic students attending UW Tacoma. Disability Resources for Students (DRS) reported there are 29 professionally diagnosed Autistic students receiving academic accommodations based on their official autism diagnosis. Not all Autistic students have received an official diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder, which is a UW Tacoma DRS requirement to receive accommodations based on autism, so not all Autistic students are receiving supportive services at UW Tacoma. Due to the lack of an official autism diagnosis, self-diagnosed Autistic students may experience even less inclusion and success than professionally diagnosed Autistic students who qualify for academic accommodations. The proposed intervention, Square Pegs On Campus: Autistic Peer Social Support Group, will be available for self-diagnosed and professionally diagnosed students who are Autistic, on the autism spectrum, and neurodiverse.

Key words: Autistic, autism, autism spectrum disorder, neurodiverse, atypical, inclusion, peer support, peer group, social group, self-diagnosed, professionally diagnosed, students

INTRODUCTION

Research shows us that Autistic students struggle with social interactions, communication, and relationships (Alpern & Zager, 2007; Ames, McMorris, Alli, & Bebko, 2015). Considering these struggles, not all Autistic students disclose their autism diagnosis or relate to an autism community (Frost, Bailey, & Ingersoll, 2019). Furthermore, not all Autistic students seek services or resources from college and/or university disability resource centers, and instead camouflage and/or mask their autism and social difficulties (Frost, Bailey, & Ingersoll, 2019). Researchers described most adolescents and young adults diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and autism, specifically high functioning autism, as exhibiting difficulties in communication with others (Alpern & Zager, 2007). These reported communication difficulties included eye contact, perspective taking, spontaneous conversations, tone and speed of speech, and Theory of Mind (Alpern & Zager, 2007). Autistic students also have difficulties within academic settings and are at risk of failing and/or dropping out of college and/or university (Ames, McMorris, Alli, & Bebko, 2015; Anderson, Carter, & Stephenson, 2018). While conducting research and interviewing UW Tacoma students and staff during the past two years, I learned there are more than 29 Autistic students attending UW Tacoma who receive DRS accommodations for Autism. Not all Autistic students have received an official autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis, which is a requirement for receiving academic accommodations, so there are Autistic students not receiving important accommodations (i.e., services and resources) while attending UW Tacoma.

Observing the struggles that my young adult child faced while transitioning from childhood to adulthood and from insurance-covered autism services during childhood to no available insurance-covered autism services during adulthood (i.e., >18 years of age) showed me the glaring gaps in the autism and ASD medical and social model systems. My young adult child was no longer eligible for social skills and social support groups from the years-long service provider beginning the day of their nineteenth birthday. As a UW Tacoma student since 2015 and seeing the Autism Center at UW Tacoma for many years, I wondered if there were services available for my 19-year-old who needed a new social support group. Upon my inquiry, I quickly

learned there were no services available for my Autistic child because he was 19 years old and receiving Washington Apple Health through Medicaid. This disappointment led me to search Google for “social support group for adults on the Autism Spectrum,” which led me to The Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetup Group. At the time of my discovery and renewed hope, in April 2019, Square Pegs consisted of a little over 1,800 members in the “Private group.” Now, as of the date of this capstone project intervention, there are more than 2,100 members in the Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetup Group. My adult child and I have been members of Square Pegs since April 2019.

Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetups (2020) are currently available in King, Pierce, and Thurston counties, via Zoom and in-person. Autistic adults (i.e., adults on the autism spectrum) and other neurodiverse (i.e., atypical) adults who are self- and/or professionally diagnosed are welcome to attend Square Pegs Meetup groups. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic there were more than 20 in-person Square Pegs peer groups available, now there are approximately 12 Square Pegs peer groups that mostly occur via virtual methods (e.g., Zoom) and vary in focus, style, and demographics (e.g., non-binary, women, students). The main purpose of these peer groups is to provide a nonjudgmental space for Autistic adults to make new friends, socialize, share lived experiences, and be part of a community. Zack Siddeek, MSW, is the Square Pegs Organizer.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2017) Code of Ethics reminds social workers of the “importance of human relationships” and “that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change” (p. 6). Furthermore, the NASW (2017) reminds social workers “to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities” (p. 6). These social work values and ethics are the backbone of this capstone project intervention. Specifically, the goal is to seek and implement interventions in order to improve inclusion and sense of belonging (i.e., close relationship) of Autistic students at the University of Washington (UW), beginning at the Tacoma campus. The capstone project intervention, Square Pegs On Campus, was fully realized after UW Tacoma key stakeholder

interviewees and previous researchers disclosed a need for social interventions and relationship building within the Autistic community and higher education institutions, specifically on campus at UW Tacoma.

Needs Statement

Autistic students need higher education institutions, including UW Tacoma, to implement additional opportunities, accommodations, policy and environmental changes, and supportive spaces in order to improve the inclusion and success of Autistic students.

Project Goals

The goals of this project are to improve inclusion, sense of belonging, equity, acceptance, and to improve academic and interpersonal success of all Autistic students, self-diagnosed and professionally diagnosed, throughout all University of Washington campuses, and eventually all higher education institutions in the United States, beginning with UW Tacoma. By increasing the number of UW Tacoma Autistic-specific social events and/or peer social support groups from zero to at least one per month, then Autistic students will have an opportunity to improve their communication and social interactions, increase inclusion, and reduce the risk of failing and/or dropping out of UW Tacoma.

Objectives and Objective Indicators

Objective 1

Increase inclusion, sense of belonging, equity, and acceptance of Autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma.

Objective 1a

By the end of June 2022, at least ten (10) Autistic students will be aware of UW Tacoma Autistic-specific social events and/or peer social support groups, measured by Square Pegs On Campus Meetup RSVPs and/or email inquiries.

Objective 1b

By the end of June 2022, at least five (5) Autistic students will attend at least three (3) UWT Autistic-specific social events and/or peer support groups, as measured by event and/or peer social support group attendance documentation.

Objective 2

Decrease the number of failing and dropout rates of Autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma.

Objective 2a

By the end of June 2022, at least 55% of UWT-documented Autistic students will be on track to graduate from their undergraduate/graduate program.

Objective 2b

By the end of June 2022, the failing and dropout rates of UWT-documented Autistic students will decrease by 5%, as measured by UWT academic grading, admissions and registration documentation.

Key Theoretical Frameworks

Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind is described as knowing what others are thinking, feeling, and experiencing, which is difficult for many Autistics (Alpern and Zager, 2007).

Student Development Theory

The Student Development Theory viewed students “as unique individuals who need to be regarded holistically and within their total environment (i.e., university) to foster their full potential” (Ames, McMorris, Alli, and Bebko, 2015, p. 29).

Disability Theory

Disability Theory views “disability as socially constructed. . .as part of human variation. . . Thus, it is not the disability that needs to be addressed, but rather the individual needs of each student” (Ames, McMorris, Alli, and Bebko, 2015, p. 29).

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

If Autistic-specific social events and/or peer social support groups were provided for Autistic students at UW Tacoma, at least once per month, then those students would have opportunities to increase their social abilities and, as research suggested, inclusion of Autistic students at UW Tacoma would increase, and the dropout rates and failing grades of Autistic students would decrease.

The proposed intervention consists of the organization and facilitation of Square Pegs On Campus, a peer social support group for students who are self-diagnosed and professionally diagnosed Autistic, on the autism spectrum, and neurodiverse (i.e., atypical). Square Pegs On Campus will be, and is, a space to meet new people and hang out with friends who are on the autism spectrum, get to know one another, have fun; and express lived experiences, thoughts, and feelings about being on the spectrum. Square Pegs On Campus is not therapy or treatment. The primary values of this peer group are inclusion, acceptance, and neurodiversity.

As part of this Autism and Inclusion at University of Washington MSW Capstone Project, Square Pegs On Campus - University of Washington Tacoma, was launched, via Zoom, on December 9, 2020. Square Pegs On Campus peer social support groups are scheduled to occur monthly, on the 2nd Wednesday of each month from 6:00pm until 7:30pm, via Zoom. Square Pegs peer group organizers and members are required to follow COVID-19 pandemic restrictions

when planning and attending in-person peer groups. Due to the current COVID-19 social distancing restrictions and UW campus closures, Square Pegs On Campus will continue to be held via Zoom until in-person, on-campus events and peer support groups are allowed and safe.

Currently, Square Pegs On Campus is a NAMI On Campus event because autism spectrum disorder is listed in the DSM-5 and there are multiple obstacles and barriers for Square Pegs On Campus to be an independent RSO. For starters, an RSO at UW Tacoma requires a minimum of five RSO officers, which, from my experience, is difficult to maintain even for neurotypical RSOs. All Square Pegs peer groups are required to be organized and facilitated by peers, so all five RSO officers would need to be self- and/or professionally diagnosed Autistic and/or on the autism spectrum. Again, from personal experience as a graduate student who is self-diagnosed on the autism spectrum (e.g., anxiety, fear of disclosure and stigma) and a RSO officer for NAMI On Campus, since 2019, recruiting and maintaining five RSO officers for an independent Square Pegs On Campus RSO will be challenging.

My vision for the future of Square Pegs On Campus is to become part of DRS and be solely organized and facilitated by self- and/or professionally diagnosed students who are Autistic, on the autism spectrum, and neurodiverse, with DRS providing support and a designated community space in the Mattress (MAT) building at UW Tacoma. Additionally, I envision collaborating with disability resource centers at Tacoma Community College, other local colleges and high schools, in an effort to reach local Autistic students who are thinking of transferring to UW Tacoma and want to become part of an Autistic community and peer social support group prior to transferring to UW Tacoma.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Problem Map

Societal value that explains why this problem exists:	Ableism: able-bodied/able-minded individuals feel and think they are superior to disabled (body and/or mind) individuals
The cause below is caused by this:	Individuals visually scan a room to find other individuals who look and/or behave the same as they are/do
The cause below is caused by this:	Individuals choose their groups/closest peers; communicate and sit with other individuals with commonalities, similarities
Problem statement below is cause by this:	Division of individuals (cliques) within classes and RSOs; abilities (physically, mentally), race/ethnicity, age, gender, religion, etc.
PROBLEM STATEMENT	Neurodiverse / Autistic adults / adults on the autism spectrum experience exclusion / limited or lack of inclusion at school.
The problem leads to this consequence:	Feelings of not belonging in class and/or in college/university
The consequence above leads to this consequence	Withdrawal from classes/college/university
The consequence above leads to this consequence	Isolation, withdraw from society, stay at home
Which costs society:	The exclusion of different, expanded knowledge and skill sets of neurodiverse / Autistic adults / adults on the autism spectrum who think outside of the neurotypical box.

Appendix B: Force Field Analysis

RESTRAINING FORCES (obstacles or barriers to achieving the goal) Identify 5 policy, attitude, program, resource or other restraining forces	
1	RSO requires minimum of 5 officers
2	Square Pegs organization requires facilitators (e.g., RSO officers) to be self- and/or professionally diagnosed Autistic / on the autism spectrum
3	COVID-19 pandemic restrictions
4	Fear of disclosing autism / autism spectrum disorder to peers (self-disclosure)
5	Stigma of autism / autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
GOAL STATEMENT (what you hope is accomplished):	
Improve inclusion (i.e., sense of belonging) of Autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma by establishing an official Square Pegs Adult Autistic social support peer group for neurodiverse and Autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma.	
DRIVING FORCES (things that support the goal) Identify 5 policy, attitude, program, resource or other supporting forces	
1	Square Pegs peer social support groups are already established throughout Washington Pierce, King, Thurston, etc.
2	Desire of many neurodiverse / Autistic adults / adults on the autism spectrum to connect during groups / in the community
3	Supportive individuals who are Autistic MSWs (e.g., Zack Siddeek)
4	Positive feedback by UWT Counseling and Psychological Services staff member during a NAMI on Campus member meeting in 2019
5	Simon Family Endowment Fellowship at UW Tacoma

Appendix C: Data Collection Worksheet

Authors: Heather Swanson

Program/Intervention Name: Square Pegs On Campus -- Adult Autistic Peer Social Support Group

Outcomes & Criteria	Tools	Data Collection Process	Data Collection Method	Validity
<p>Outcome 1: Increased inclusion (e.g., sense of belonging) of Autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma.</p> <p>Indicator A: By the end of June 2022, at least ten (10) Autistic students will be aware of UWT Autistic-specific social events and/or peer social support groups, as measured by Square Pegs On Campus UWT Meetup RSVPs and/or email inquiries.</p> <p>Criteria to achieve indicator A: The RSVPs and inquiries by Autistic students will total at least 10.</p> <p>Indicator B: By the end of June 2022, at least five (5) Autistic students will attend at least three (3) UWT Autistic-specific social events and/or peer support groups, as measured by event and/or peer social support group attendance documentation.</p> <p>Criteria to achieve indicator B: Collected data will show that at least five Autistic students each attended at least three Autistic-specific events/groups.</p> <p>Outcome 2: Decreased failing and dropout rates of Autistic students</p>	<p>Outcome 1: Square Pegs Meetup website and RSVP notifications feature.</p> <p>Square Pegs On Campus attendance documentation (e.g., attendee names, UW or non-UW affiliation)</p> <p>Outcome 2: Academic grading, admissions and registration documentation and/or reports from the Registrar office.</p>	<p>Process used to collect data.</p> <p>Who -</p> <p>Host and/or facilitator of social events and/or peer social support groups will document and collect the Square Pegs names of RSVPs and actual attendees.</p> <p>Host and/or facilitator of social events and/or peer social support groups will contact the Registrar office and submit a request for data (e.g., total of graduations, failing grades, and dropouts of Autistic students).</p> <p>When –</p>	<p>Do you gather data on ALL Clients?</p> <p>YES and NO.</p> <p>Data will be gathered on all members who RSVP and/or attend monthly peer support groups and/or social events.</p> <p>Data will be collected on all UWT students who provided UWT with an official diagnosis of autism and/or autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Collection of UWT Autistic students who attend and don't attend Autistic-specific groups can be compared, to better determine if there is a correlation</p>	<p>Identify step(s) to ensure (List the most important - at least one step for each tool)</p> <p>Use of established Square Pegs Meetup RSVP features will provide valid RSVP data.</p> <p>Use of email inquiries documentation will provide valid awareness data.</p> <p>Use of established UWT Registrar admissions, grading and registration documentation will provide validity.</p> <p>Reliability</p>

<p>at the University of Washington Tacoma.</p> <p>Indicator A: By the end of June 2022, at least 55%* of UWT-documented Autistic students will be on track to graduate from their undergraduate/graduate program.</p> <p>Criteria to achieve indicator A: Registrar documentation will show that at least 55% of UWT-documented Autistic students are on track for graduation.</p> <p>Indicator B: By the end of June 2022, the failing and dropout rates will decrease by 5%, as measured by UWT academic grading, admissions and registration documentation.</p> <p>Criteria to achieve indicator B: Registrar documentation will show at least a 5% decrease in failing grades and dropout rates.</p>		<p>The Square Pegs Meetup RSVP feature will track and save RSVP data, which will be collected by the host/facilitator on the day of the monthly peer social support group and/or social event.</p> <p>The actual attendance data will be collected by the host/facilitator during the monthly peer social support group and/or social event.</p> <p>The graduation, failing and/or dropout rates will be gathered during the week between quarters, after grades are posted and/or added to transcripts.</p>	<p>between the intervention and data (e.g., increases, decreases, improvements).</p> <p>The online Square Pegs Meetup system automatically tracks RSVPs and notifies the facilitators of RSVPs.</p> <p>Attendance of all group and/or social events can be documented during groups and/or events.</p> <p>UWT does not know which UWT students are self-diagnosed and/or did not disclose to UWT as professionally diagnosed Autistic/on the autism spectrum.</p>	<p>Identify step(s) to ensure (List the most important - at least one step for each tool)</p> <p>RSVPs are automatically tracked and saved by Square Pegs Meetup. This data will be calculated and documented on the day of monthly events/groups.</p> <p>Email inquiries from Autistic students will be collected throughout the month. The totals will be calculated and documented on the day of monthly events/groups.</p> <p>Event/group attendance by Autistic students will be calculated and documented on the day of monthly events/groups.</p> <p>Monthly peer support groups will be scheduled to occur on the second Wednesday of each month.</p>
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				<p>Documentation of Autistic students being on-track for graduation, failing grades and dropout rates will be collected and calculated on a quarterly basis, always during the week between quarters, specifically after grades post to transcripts and before the next quarter begins.</p> <p>Collecting data at the same time during the month and/or quarter will provide consistency and reliability.</p>
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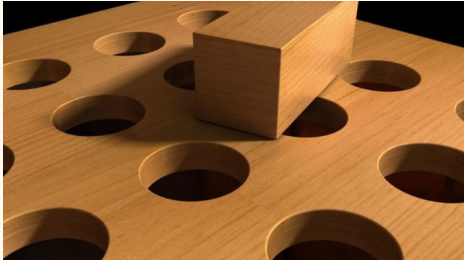
Appendix D: Logic Model Template

Needs Statement: Autistic students need higher education institutions, including University of Washington Tacoma, to implement additional opportunities, accommodations, policy and environmental changes, and supportive spaces in order to improve the inclusion (e.g., sense of belonging, equity, and acceptance) and success (e.g., academic and interpersonal) of Autistic students.						
Theory & Key Assumptions	Resources	Activities (Process objectives)	Outputs * (Outcome/Summative Objectives)	Outcomes (Short Term Goals)	Outcome Indicators* (Outcome/Summative Objectives)	Long Term Goal
<p>Student Development Theory</p> <p>Disability Theory</p> <p>Autistic students struggle with communication and social interaction. Autistic students are at-risk for dropping out of college and/or university.</p> <p>Social construct of disabilities (e.g., autism) and ableism, which is a</p>	<p>Time</p> <p>University of Washington Tacoma (e.g., funds/budget, policy, building spaces, DRS, CAPS, CEI, Autism Center)</p> <p>NAMI On Campus RSO at UW Tacoma</p> <p>Square Pegs Meetup</p> <p>Internet</p> <p>Zoom</p> <p>Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Training -</p>	<p>Development, organize, promote, and provide social events and/or peer social support groups on campus and/or via Zoom (depending on COVID-19 safety restrictions and guidelines) for Autistic students.</p> <p>Outreach will include emailing event/group information to UWT Autism Center, UWT CAPS, UWT DRS, UWT CEI, Simon Family Endowment</p>	<p>Increase the number of UWT Autistic-specific social events and/or peer social support groups from zero to at least one per month on the second Wednesday of each month, from 6pm to 7:30pm.</p>	<p>Outcome 1: Increase inclusion (e.g., sense of belonging, equity, and acceptance) of Autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma.</p> <p>Outcome 2: Decrease failing and dropout rates of Autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma.</p>	<p>Indicator 1a. By the end of June 2022, at least ten (10) Autistic students will be aware of UWT Autistic-specific social events and/or peer social support groups, as measured by Square Pegs On Campus UWT Meetup RSVPs and/or email inquiries.</p> <p>Indicator 1b. By the end of June 2022, at least five (5) Autistic students will attend at least three (3) UWT Autistic-specific social events and/or peer support groups, as measured by event and/or peer social support group attendance documentation.</p> <p>Indicator 2a. By the end of June 2022, at least 55%*</p>	<p>Improve inclusion (e.g., sense of belonging, equity, and acceptance), and success (e.g., academic and interpersonal) of Autistic students throughout all University of Washington campuses, and eventually all higher education institutions in the United States.</p>

<p>well-known cultural factor, negatively affects the inclusion of Autistic students.</p> <p>There are more than 29 Autistic students attending UW Tacoma because 29 Autistic students receive DRS accommodations for Autism, and yet not all Autistics have received an official diagnosis, which is required to be approved for DRS accommodations based on an autism diagnosis.</p> <p>If social events and/or peer</p>	<p>Adults & Youth Sessions (for peer social support group facilitators)</p> <p>Games, snacks and beverages (when events/peer social support groups are on campus)</p> <p>Notebooks (for documenting events/groups attendance that will be needed for monitoring and reporting data and progress)</p>	<p>Autism MSW Fellows, and posting information on UWT Dawg Den 2.0 on the NAMI On Campus RSO page.</p> <p>Outreach will also occur monthly during South Sound Autism Partnership (SSAP) community meetings.</p> <p>Events/groups will be added to Square Pegs Meetup, which automatically emails events to 2,100 members, which include UWT students.</p>			<p>of UWT-documented Autistic students will be on track to graduate from their undergraduate/graduate program.</p> <p>Indicator 2b. By the end of June 2022, the failing and dropout rates will decrease by 5%, as measured by UWT academic grading, admissions and registration documentation.</p> <p>(*I need to request from UWT the actual dropout rates of documented Autistic students, so I will be able to determine a realistic indicator percentage (%). Previous research shows 61.2% of higher education Autistic students fail and/or drop out of college/university.)</p>	
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<p>support groups were offered/provided at UW Tacoma for Autistic students, then those students would increase their social abilities, and inclusion of Autistic students at UWT would increase and dropout rates would decrease.</p>						
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Appendix E: Square Pegs On Campus Flyer



NAMI On Campus presents
Square Pegs On Campus
A peer social support group for students who are Autistic, on the Autism Spectrum, and Neurodiverse

Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetup -- Square Pegs On Campus

Meets the **2nd Wednesday** of every month.

Time: **6:00 p.m. - 7:30 p.m.**

Current Location: **Zoom**

Meeting ID: **945 2550 5629**

Future Location: (University of Washington Tacoma)

Building/Room: (TBD after COVID-19 restrictions are removed)

This peer group is a space and place to meet new people and hang out with friends who are Autistic, on the autism spectrum, and neurodiverse; get to know one another and have fun; and express lived experiences, thoughts, and feelings about being on the spectrum. This peer group is not therapy or treatment. The primary values of this peer group are inclusion, acceptance, and neurodiversity. We will do what we can to make sure everyone has a positive, welcoming experience.

We look forward to meeting people on all parts of the spectrum, including self- and professionally diagnosed Autistic and neurodiverse students. Supportive adult family members and friends are welcome to accompany Autistic and neurodiverse members.

Questions? Please contact Heather Swanson, NAMI On Campus Vice President, at hdswan@uw.edu or hdswan2000@gmail.com.

Appendix F: Square Pegs On Campus Outreach Email

Subject: Square Pegs On Campus -- University of Washington Tacoma

Good (morning/afternoon/evening),

I wanted to reach out and let you know that Square Pegs On Campus will launch, via Zoom, on Wednesday, (month day, year). I attached a flyer and Zoom link information below. Several members of Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetup have already RSVP'd for the (month day) meeting, so Square Pegs On Campus is definitely happening! This new Square Pegs On Campus will be a monthly peer social support group (virtual for now) for Autistic and neurodiverse adults, scheduled to occur on the second Wednesday of each month at 6pm, as to maintain consistency within the Tacoma Square Pegs community; Square Pegs Tacoma at Elmer's Restaurant occurs in-person on the first and third Wednesdays of each month at 6pm, when safe as per COVID restrictions. Eventually Square Pegs On Campus will be held in-person after COVID restrictions are removed and meeting on-campus is safe to do, unless members prefer to continue with virtual groups via Zoom.

Square Pegs On Campus: <https://www.meetup.com/Squarepegs/events/274276536/>

Join Zoom Meeting: <https://washington.zoom.us/j/94525505629>

Meeting ID: 945 2550 5629

Please reach out to me if you have any questions, concerns, and/or feedback.

Sincerely,

Heather Swanson

Pronouns: she/her

2018-2021 MSW Graduate Student

2019-2021 NAMI On Campus Vice President

2020-2021 Simon Family Endowment Autism MSW Fellow

2020-2021 Square Pegs On Campus Organizer/Facilitator


2020-2021 Husky 100

hdswan@uw.edu

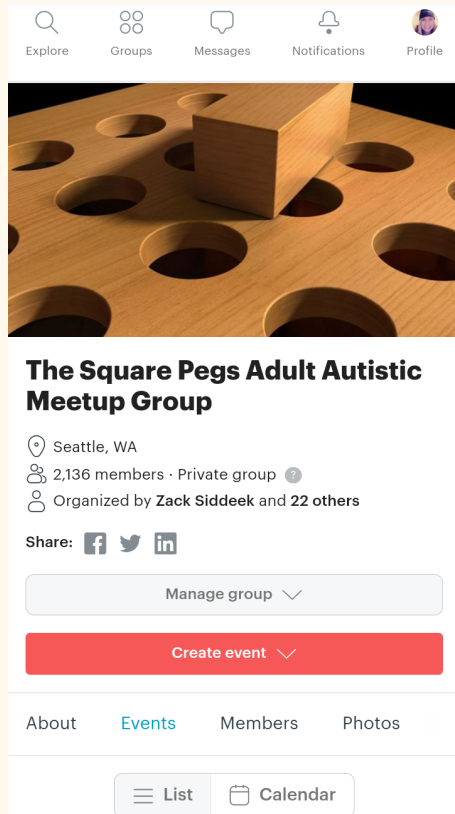
hdswan2000@gmail.com

ADDENDUMS

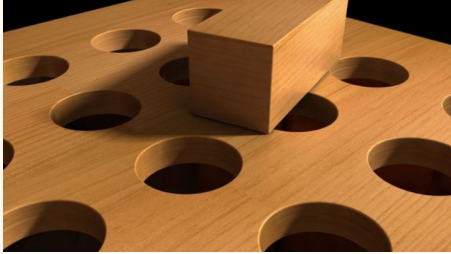
Addendum A: MSW Capstone Project Intervention Poster

<p>NEEDS STATEMENT Autistic students need higher education institutions, including University of Washington Tacoma, to implement additional opportunities, accommodations, policy and environmental changes, and supportive spaces in order to improve the inclusion (e.g., sense of belonging, equity, and acceptance) and success (e.g., academic and interpersonal) of Autistic students.</p> 	<p>Square Pegs On Campus University of Washington Tacoma</p>	<p>OBJECTIVES Outcome 1. Increase inclusion (e.g., sense of belonging, equity, and acceptance) of Autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma.</p>
<p>GOALS Improve inclusion (e.g., sense of belonging, equity, and acceptance), and success (e.g., academic and interpersonal) of Autistic students throughout all University of Washington campuses, and eventually all higher education institutions in the United States.</p>	<p>PROPOSED INTERVENTION Organize and facilitate a peer social support group for students who are self-diagnosed & professionally-diagnosed Autistic, on the Autism Spectrum, and Neurodiverse.</p> <p>Square Pegs On Campus is a space to meet new people and hang out with friends who are on the autism spectrum, get to know one another, have fun; and express lived experiences, thoughts, and feelings about being on the spectrum.</p> <p>This group is not therapy or treatment.</p> <p>The primary values of this peer group are inclusion, acceptance, and neurodiversity.</p>	<p>Outcome 2. Decrease failing and dropout rates of Autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma.</p>
	<p>Heather Dawn Swanson MSW Candidate Simon Family Endowment Autism MSW Fellow Self-diagnosed, Self-advocate, Parent</p>	<p>OBJECTIVE INDICATORS Indicator 1a. By the end of June 2022, at least ten (10) Autistic students will be aware of UWT Autistic-specific social events and/or peer social support groups, as measured by Square Pegs On Campus UWT Meetup RSVPs and/or email inquiries.</p> <p>Indicator 1b. By the end of June 2022, at least five (5) Autistic students will attend at least three (3) UWT Autistic-specific social events and/or peer support groups, as measured by event and/or peer social support group attendance documentation.</p> <p>Indicator 2a. By the end of June 2022, at least 55% of UWT-documented Autistic students will be on track to graduate from their undergraduate/graduate program.</p> <p>Indicator 2b. By the end of June 2022, the failing and dropout rates will decrease by 5%, as measured by UWT academic grading, admissions and registration documentation.</p>

Addendum B: MSW Capstone Project Intervention Materials and Evaluation Tools



Explore Groups Messages Notifications Profile



The Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetup Group

Seattle, WA
2,136 members · Private group
Organized by Zack Siddeek and 22 others

Share: [f](#) [t](#) [in](#)


Manage group

Create event

About Events Members Photos

List Calendar

You're going to this event!



The Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetup Group
Private group

Wednesday, March 10, 2021

Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetup -- Square Pegs On Campus -- UW Tacoma

Hosted by
Heather Swanson

Share

Organizer tools

Wednesday, March 10, 2021
6:00 PM to 7:30 PM PST
Every 2nd Wednesday of the month
[Add to calendar](#)

Online event
<https://washington.zoom.us/j/94525505629>

You're going!
[Edit RSVP](#)

Share



Details

Square Pegs On Campus - University of Washington Tacoma is a social-support peer group for any adult who is on the Autism Spectrum or Neurodivergent.

Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetup -- Square Pegs On Campus - UWT

Meets the 2nd Wednesday of every month
Time: 6:00 p.m. - 7:30 p.m.

Current Location: Zoom

Meeting ID: 945 2550 5629

Future Location: (University of Washington Tacoma)

Building/Room: (TBD after COVID-19 restrictions are removed)

You're going!

[Edit RSVP](#)

[Share](#)

meetup.com/Squarepegs, 33

This peer group is a space to meet new people and hang out with friends who are on the autism spectrum, get to know one another, have fun; and express lived experiences, thoughts, and feelings about being on the spectrum. This peer group is not a therapy or treatment group. The primary values of this peer group are inclusion, acceptance, and neurodiversity. We will do what we can to make sure everyone has a positive, welcoming experience.

We look forward to meeting people from all parts of the spectrum, including self- and professionally-diagnosed young and older autistic and neurodiverse adults. Supportive adult family members and friends are welcome to accompany autistic/neurodiverse members.

Questions? Please contact Heather Swanson, NAMI On Campus Vice President, at hdswan@uw.edu or hdswan2000@gmail.com.

Attendees (11)

[Manage](#)

You're going!

[Edit RSVP](#)

[Share](#)

Wednesday: You're hosting
 "Square Pegs Adult Autistic
 Meetup -- Square Pegs On
 Campus -- UW Tacoma" ☆

Inbox

T The Square Pegs... 3 days ago ↩ ⋮
 to me ^

From The Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetup
 Group • info@meetup.com
 To hdswan2000@gmail.com
 Date Mar 4, 2021, 7:27 PM
 Standard encryption (TLS).
 View security details

MAR
10 Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetu...
 Add to calendar

🕒 Wednesday, March 10
 6:00 – 7:30 PM

📍 Online event

meetup

WEDNESDAY

Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetup -- Square Pegs On Campus -- UW Tacoma

The Square Pegs Adult
 Autistic Meetup Group

Wednesday, March 10,
 2021

6:00 PM PT

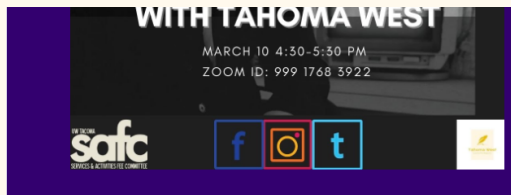
Online event

[https://washington.zoo
 m.us/j/94525505629](https://washington.zoo

 m.us/j/94525505629)

I'm going

Change your
 RSVP



NAMI On Campus: Square Pegs On Campus Autistic Peer Group

March 10, 6:00 - 7:30pm

Square Pegs On Campus is an Autistic peer group for students to meet new people and hang out with friends who are on the autism spectrum, get to know one another, have fun; and express lived experiences, thoughts, and feelings about being on the spectrum. This group is not a therapy or treatment group. The primary values of this group are inclusion, acceptance, and neurodiversity. Peer group meets monthly, on second Wednesday of every month, at 6pm.

Zoom: <https://washington.zoom.us/j/94525505629>

<https://www.meetup.com/Squarepegs/events/sdficsyccfbnb/>

Questions? hdswan@uw.edu

Student Employment Job Fair

Wednesday, March 10, 3-5pm

Will work for students at UW Tacoma for the

Addendum C: MSW Capstone Project Intervention Proposal

Name: Heather Dawn Swanson

Title of project: Autism and Inclusion at University of Washington - Square Pegs On Campus: Autistic Peer Social Support Group

Brief introduction

Research shows Autistic students struggle with communication and social interaction, and they are at risk of dropping out of college and/or university. The goal of this project is to improve inclusion (e.g., sense of belonging, equity, and acceptance), and success (e.g., academic and interpersonal) of Autistic students throughout all University of Washington (UW) campuses, and eventually all higher education institutions in the United States. By increasing the number of UW Tacoma (UWT) Autistic-specific social events and/or peer social support groups (e.g., Square Pegs On Campus) from zero to at least one per month, on the second Wednesday of each month, then Autistic students will have an opportunity to improve their communication and social interactions, increase inclusion, and reduce the risk of failing and/or dropping out of UWT.

Description of project

Population served: Autistic students struggle with communication and social interaction, and they are at risk of failing and/or dropping out of college and/or university. Additionally, the social construct of disabilities (e.g., autism) and/or ableism, which is a well-known cultural factor, negatively affects the inclusion of Autistic students. While conducting research that included interviews of UWT students and staff, I learned there are more than 29 Autistic students attending UW Tacoma. Twenty-nine Autistic students receive DRS accommodations for Autism, and yet not all Autistics have received an official diagnosis, which is required to be approved for DRS accommodations based on an autism diagnosis.

Theoretical orientation: This proposed project utilizes Theory of Mind, Student Development Theory, and Disability Theory. Theory of Mind is knowing what others are thinking, feeling, and experiencing, which is difficult for Autistics (Alpern & Zager, 2007). The Student Development Theory viewed students “as unique individuals who need to be regarded holistically and within their total environment (i.e., university) to foster their full potential” (Ames, McMorris, Alli, and Bebko, 2015, p. 29). Disability Theory views “disability as socially constructed. . . as part of human variation. . . Thus, it is not the disability that needs to be addressed, but rather the individual needs of each student” (Ames, McMorris, Alli, and Bebko, 2015, p. 29).

Initial introduction of proposed intervention: Neurodiverse and/or Autistic adults (i.e., adults on the autism spectrum) experience exclusion and/or limited or lack of inclusion at UWT (see Addendum A). Empirical research and key stakeholder interview findings support this problem statement. The goal of this proposed project is to improve inclusion (i.e., sense of belonging) of Autistic students at UWT by implementing an intervention, possibly a social support peer group for neurodiverse and/or Autistic students (see Addendum B). Merriam-Webster (n.d.b) defined “inclusion” as “the act of including; the state of being included; the act or practice of including

students with disabilities with the general student population; the act or practice of including and accommodating people who have historically been excluded (as because of their race, gender, sexuality, or ability).” Merriam-Webster (n.d.a) defined “belonging” as a “close or intimate relationship // a sense of *belonging*.” If social events and/or peer social support groups were offered/provided at UW Tacoma for Autistic students, then those students would have additional opportunities to increase their social abilities and, as research suggests, inclusion of Autistic students at UWT would increase, and rates of Autistic student dropouts and failing grades would decrease.

Values and ethical considerations: The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2017) Code of Ethics reminds social workers of the “importance of human relationships” and “that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change” (p. 6). Furthermore, the NASW (2017) reminds social workers “to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities” (p. 6). These social work values and ethics are the backbone of this project. Specifically, the goal of this project is to seek and implement interventions that may improve inclusion and sense of belonging (i.e., close relationship) of Autistic students at UWT. Key stakeholders and previous researchers disclosed a need for social interventions and relationship building within the Autistic community and higher education institutions, specifically on campus at UWT.

Background of topic

Research shows Autistic students struggle with social interactions, communication, and relationships (Ames, McMorris, Alli, & Bebko, 2015). In addition to their social struggles, this population of students do not always disclose their autism diagnosis and are not always connected with an autism community (Frost, Bailey, & Ingersoll, 2019). Furthermore, this population does not always seek services or resources from college and/or university disability resource centers, and instead camouflage and/or mask their autism and social difficulties (Frost, Bailey, & Ingersoll, 2019). Researchers described most adolescents and young adults diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome and autism, specifically high functioning autism, as exhibiting difficulties in communication with others (Alpern & Zager, 2007). These reported communication difficulties included eye contact, perspective taking, spontaneous conversations, tone and speed of speech, and Theory of Mind (Alpern & Zager, 2007). Autistic students also have difficulties within academic settings and are at risk for dropping out of college and/or university (Anderson, Carter, & Stephenson, 2018).

Observing the struggles my young adult child faced while transitioning from childhood to adulthood and from insurance-covered autism services during childhood to no insurance-covered available autism services during adulthood (i.e., >18 years of age) showed me gaps in the autism/autism spectrum disorder (ASD) medical and social model systems. My young adult child was no longer eligible for social skills and social support groups at Children’s Therapy Unit beginning the day of their nineteenth birthday. As a UWT student since 2015 and seeing the Autism Center on-campus for many years, I wondered if there were services available for my 19-year-old who needed a new social support group. Upon my inquiry, I quickly learned there were no services available for my Autistic child because he was 19 years old and receiving

Washington Apple Health through Medicaid. This disappointment led me to search Google for a “social support group for adults on the Autism Spectrum,” which led me to The Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetup Group, which at that time, in April 2019, consisted of a little over 1,800 members in the “Private group.” Now, as of the date of this proposal, there are more than 2,100 members.

The Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetup Group (2020) offers peer groups in King, Pierce, and Thurston counties, via Zoom and in-person. Currently, organizers (i.e., facilitators) and members must follow COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, which have increased virtual, remote peer social support groups. Autistic adults (i.e., adults on the autism spectrum) and other neurodiverse adults who are self- and/or professionally diagnosed are welcome to attend Square Pegs Meetup peer groups. There are more than a dozen groups available that vary in focus, style, and demographics (e.g., non-binary, women, parents, students). The main purpose of these peer groups is to provide a nonjudgmental space for Autistics to make new friends, socialize, share lived experiences, and be part of a community. Zack Siddeek, MSW, is and has been the Square Pegs Organizer since 2008. As part of my “Autism and Inclusion at University of Washington” project, I met with Zack Siddeek on December 26, 2019 in-person, to discuss my desire and plan to organize and launch Square Pegs On Campus - University of Washington Tacoma within one year.

Risk/opportunities

The benefits of this project include improved sense of belonging, equity, and acceptance of Autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma. Decreased failing and dropout rates of UWT Autistic students is another benefit. Additionally, Autistic students may improve their communication and socialization skills through this proposed intervention.

Potential barriers impacting successful implementation of this proposed intervention include the UWT Registered Student Organization (RSO) requirement of maintaining a minimum of five RSO officers. Being self- and/or professionally diagnosed as Autistic and/or with ASD (e.g., “on the spectrum”) is a requirement of organizing and facilitating a Square Pegs Autistic Adult Meetup Group. Finding and maintaining a minimum of five RSO officers who are Autistic will be challenging, especially when research shows many Autistics do not disclose being Autistic and/or choose to camouflage (e.g., masking autism, blending in as neurotypical) (Frost, Bailey, & Ingersoll, 2019). Additionally, in my experience as an RSO officer of RSOs (e.g., NAMI On Campus, ODK), even maintaining five neurotypical officers can be challenging because the responsibilities of RSO officers, UWT course load, personal and family life can be challenging. As a self-diagnosed Autistic graduate student who is also an RSO officer, I experience an overwhelming number of conflicting responsibilities, which triggers Autistic Burnout (e.g., brain shuts down and productivity decreases). Square Pegs On Campus will initially launch as part of NAMI On Campus, which is an already established RSO. However, I recommend Square Pegs On Campus become part of UWT Disability Resources for Students, with the Autistic peer support groups being organized and facilitated only by Autistic students, not neurotypical students, staff or faculty. Additionally, these Autistic students must not be required to provide ASD diagnosis documents because Square Pegs On Campus is a peer group for self- and/or professionally diagnosed Autistics. The current DRS policy that requires Autistic students to provide official diagnosis documentation is a major barrier that prevents Autistic students from

seeking and receiving accommodations (e.g., academic, interpersonal, social support) at UWT. There are already barriers in trying to seek and acquire an official Autism and/or Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis because of lengthy assessment waiting lists, limitations in acceptable insurance, expensive out-of-pocket assessments, and fear of stigma (Matestic, interview, 2020).

Budget

This project proposal does not include a source of revenue or required expenses, except for minimal expenses (e.g., snacks, water, notebook, games) that may be voluntarily incurred by social support group facilitators and attendees, in the future after COVID-19 restrictions are lifted and groups begin in-person, on-campus. If attendees and facilitators choose to play games during in-person, on-campus social support groups, they can bring games already owned, so there will be no need for Square Pegs On Campus to purchase games for future events. Currently, Zoom capabilities are provided to UWT students, so the social support group facilitator is not required to pay for a premium Zoom account. UWT will not be required to provide internet services for social support group facilitators. Internet services that are required to attend social support groups will be incurred by attendees and social support group facilitators, which is most likely an expense they already pay for in order to attend remote courses on CANVAS and Zoom. Square Pegs Meetup is a no-cost web service. The use of meeting spaces at UWT are included in the cost of student tuitions, so the project proposal does not include meeting space expenses. If the social support group facilitator is a recipient of the Simon Family Endowment Autism MSW Fellowship, the Autism MSW Fellow is encouraged to use a portion of the fellowship funds towards the minimal expenses (e.g., snacks, water, notebook, games). Additionally, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training is optional, not required, and is available at no cost through community organizations, including Tacoma Pierce County Health Department (TPCHD).

Square Pegs On Campus Line-Item Budgeting System

Revenue	0
Required Expenses	0
Voluntary/Optional/Donated Expenses (e.g., snacks, water, games, notebook)	< \$120 annually

Advertising/Marketing plan

Outreach will include emailing event and/or peer group information (see Addendum E and Addendum F) to UWT Autism Center, UWT Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), UWT Disability Resources for Students (DRS), UWT Center for Equity and Inclusion (CEI), Simon Family Endowment Autism MSW Fellows, and posting information on UWT Dawg Den 2.0, more specifically on the NAMI On Campus RSO page, and utilize UWT 411 (i.e., weekly emails that promote UWT events). Additional outreach will include sharing and presenting Square Pegs On Campus details during the South Sound Autism Partnership (SSAP) community meetings, which occur on the second Friday of each month. These monthly meetings are

organized and led by Dr. Patricia Matestic, Licensed Clinical Psychologist and Director of the UWT Autism Center. In addition to advertising Square Pegs On Campus throughout UWT, the designated organizer/facilitator will post monthly events and/or peer groups on The Square Pegs Autistic Adult Meetup Group, which automatically emails organized events to more than 2,100 members, which include UWT students who signed up for the private Square Pegs group.

Evaluation plan

Evaluation of this project will consist of collecting data on monthly and quarterly basis (see Addendum C), and then determining if the project's short-term goals (e.g., outcomes) were met by the end of each school year, beginning with the end of the 2021-2022 school year (see Addendum D). This project will be deemed successful if the data shows increased inclusion (e.g., sense of belonging) of Autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma. The data would need to show that by the end of June 2022, at least ten (10) Autistic students were aware of UWT Autistic-specific social events and/or peer social support groups, as measured by Square Pegs On Campus UWT Meetup RSVPs and/or email inquiries. Additionally, the data would need to show that by the end of June 2022, at least five (5) Autistic students attended at least three (3) UWT Autistic-specific social events and/or peer support groups, as measured by event and/or peer social support group attendance documentation. This project will also be deemed successful if the data shows decreased failing and dropout rates of Autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma. The data would need to show that by the end of June 2022, at least 55% of UWT-documented Autistic students would be on track to graduate from their undergraduate/graduate program. The data would also need to show that by the end of June 2022, the failing and dropout rates decreased by 5%, as measured by UWT academic grading, admissions and registration documentation.

Data will be gathered on all members who RSVP and/or attend monthly peer support groups and/or social events. The online Square Pegs Meetup system automatically tracks RSVPs and notifies the facilitators of RSVPs. The organizer and/or facilitator of Autistic-specific social events and/or peer social support groups will document and collect the Square Pegs names of RSVPs and actual attendees. The Square Pegs Meetup RSVP feature will track and save RSVP data, which will be collected by the organizer/facilitator on the day of the monthly peer social support group and/or social event. Use of established Square Pegs Meetup RSVP features will provide valid RSVP data. The actual attendance data will be collected by the organizer/facilitator during the monthly peer social support group and/or social event. Registrar data (e.g., grades, admissions, and registration) will be collected on all Autistic students who provided UWT with an official diagnosis of autism and/or autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The organizer and/or facilitator of social events and/or peer social support groups will contact the Registrar office staff and submit a request for data (e.g., total of graduations, failing grades, and dropouts of Autistic students). The graduation, failing and/or dropout rates will be gathered during the week between quarters, after grades are posted and/or added to transcripts. However, UWT does not know which students are self-diagnosed and/or did not disclose to UWT as professionally diagnosed Autistic/on the autism spectrum, so the data provided by UWT will be limited by current policies. Collection of UWT Autistic students who attend and do not attend Autistic-specific groups can be compared, to better determine if there is a correlation between the intervention and data (e.g., increases, decreases, improvements). Use of established UWT Registrar admissions,

grading and registration documentation will provide validity. Collecting data at the same time during the month and/or quarter will provide consistency and reliability.

Next steps for implementation

The organizer and/or facilitator will:

1. Set up Zoom with the recurring monthly meeting information.
2. Create a recurring event page within The Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetup Group (<https://www.meetup.com/Squarepegs>) that will provide potential attendees with the monthly meeting information from the recurring Zoom meeting.
3. Create a Square Pegs On Campus flyer (see Addendum E) that contains all the information needed for the recruitment of Autistic students to join the monthly peer support group on Zoom.
4. Draft a Square Pegs On Campus recruitment email (see Addendum F).
5. Send Square Pegs On Campus recruitment email to UWT Autism Center, DRS, CAPS, CEI, and Simon Family Endowment Fellows and Advisor, Dr. San Nicolas.
6. Create an event on the NAMI On Campus page within Dawg Den 2.0, and then submit for approval. The event will be visible to UWT students after UWT Center for Student Involvement staff approves the event.
7. Be ready to receive email inquiries and/or RSVPs and begin documenting and collecting data.
8. If the organizer and/or facilitator wants to be better prepared to facilitate the monthly peer support groups, then search the internet for local Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training sessions and attend MHFA (e.g., adult and youth training).
9. Seek an Autistic peer to be a co-host of the monthly peer support groups.
10. Prepare to facilitate peer support groups, and then launch Square Pegs On Campus.
11. Seek guidance, if needed, from Zack Siddeek, MSW, Organizer of The Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetup Group.

Addendum D: MSW Capstone Project Information Report

Information Report: Autism and Inclusion at University of Washington

Heather Dawn Swanson

University of Washington, Tacoma

TSOCW 532B: Integrative Practice I

Dr. Anindita Bhattacharya

December 10, 2020

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Information Report: Autism and Inclusion at University of Washington

Introduction

This report provides information, such as resources and research data, that describes a problem with limited inclusion of autistic students at the University of Washington, Tacoma (UWT) campus. The information in this report was gleaned from websites of resource organizations, empirical articles, key stakeholder interviews and email correspondence. Resource organizations include Center for Independence (CFI), Children’s Therapy Unit (CTU), Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetups, and the University of Washington Tacoma, Disability Resources for Students (DRS) and Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) departments. Key stakeholders included two UWT autistic students, a parent of an autistic student, a Disability Resources for Students (DRS) Program Coordinator/Accommodations Specialist, and the UWT Autism Center Director.

Problem Statement

Neurodiverse and/or autistic adults (i.e., adults on the autism spectrum) experience exclusion and/or limited or lack of inclusion at UWT (see Appendix A). Empirical research and key stakeholder interview findings support this problem statement.

Goal Statement

The goal of this project is to improve inclusion (i.e., sense of belonging) of autistic students at UWT by implementing an intervention, possibly a social-support peer group for neurodiverse and/or autistic students (see Appendix B).

Definitions: Inclusion and Belonging

Merriam-Webster (n.d.b) defined “inclusion” as “the act of including: the state of being included; the act or practice of including students with disabilities with the general student population; the act or practice of including and accommodating people who have historically been excluded (as because of their race, gender, sexuality, or ability).” Merriam-Webster (n.d.a) defined “belonging” as a “close or intimate relationship // a sense of *belonging*.”

Historical and Current Understanding

Autistic students struggle with social interactions, communication, and relationships (Ames, McMorris, Alli, & Bebko, 2015). In addition to their social struggles, this population of students do not always disclose their autism diagnosis and are not always connected with an autism community (Frost, Bailey, & Ingersoll, 2019). Additionally, this population does not always seek services or resources from college and/or university disability resource centers, and instead camouflage and/or mask their autism and social difficulties (Frost, Bailey, & Ingersoll, 2019). Research findings describe most adolescents and young adults diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome and autism, specifically high functioning autism, as exhibiting difficulties in communication with others (Alpern & Zager, 2007). These communication difficulties included eye contact, perspective taking, spontaneous conversations, tone and speed of speech, and Theory of Mind (Alpern & Zager, 2007). Autistic students also have difficulties within academic settings and are at risk for dropping out of college and/or university (Anderson, Carter, & Stephenson, 2018).

Theoretical Frameworks

Alpern and Zager (2007) used “Theory of Mind as a theoretical basis for the intervention procedures” (p. 434) and described Theory of Mind as knowing what others are thinking, feeling, and experiencing, which is difficult for Autistics. Ames, McMorris, Alli, and Bebko, (2015) utilized Student Development Theory and Disability Theory in their research. The Student Development Theory viewed students “as unique individuals who need to be regarded holistically and within their total environment (i.e., university) to foster their full potential” (p. 29). Ames, McMorris, Alli, and Bebko (2015) also utilized Disability Theory in the research and acknowledged “disability as socially constructed. . .as part of human variation. . . Thus, it is not the disability that needs to be addressed, but rather the individual needs of each student” (p. 29).

Cultural and Global Influences

In addition to socially constructed disabilities, ableism is a well-known cultural factor that influences and affects inclusion and Autistic students, including at UWT. Disabled individuals, including Autistics, have fought for equal rights and equity for decades, which is how disability rights and accommodations came to be. Frost, Bailey, & Ingersoll (2019) stated “cultural identities are negotiated and renegotiated within relational contexts, and that the scope, intensity, and salience of identities vary dynamically across situations and relationships” (p. 273), which influences inclusion of Autistics at higher education institutions.

Difference and Diversity

Disparities based on racial, ethnic, gender, gender identity/expression, religion, ability, age, sexual orientation, citizenship status, socioeconomic class seemed to not be addressed in the empirical literature used for this project. However, this project focuses on inclusion and Autistic students, which falls under disparities based on ability. Additionally, I noticed most participants

in previous research are White males, and most key stakeholders in this research project are White females. Additionally, based on personal observation while attending social support groups for Autistics, most members are White males.

Systemic and Economic Influences

Insufficient funding and lack of space on-campus seem to be important influences that negatively affect the problem of limited inclusion and lack of social support for Autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma. Finances and health insurance also factor into the insufficient social support and services offered and provided at the UWT Autism Center. In addition to insufficient funding and space, ableism, overlooking Autistic students, is another systemic factor in the lack of social support on campus. Most of the Registered Student Organizations (RSOs) on campus are created for able-bodied students and the requirements to create and maintain an RSO are not disabled- and/or Autistic-friendly, which creates another barrier for the impacted populations.

Interventions

The empirical literature review for this project gathered numerous intervention recommendations, including Alpern and Zager (2007) who recommended interventions for improving communication of Autistic students, specifically “effective interventions for increasing and improving social interaction between adolescents with intellectual disabilities and general education peers in secondary schools” (p. 431). Ames, McMorris, Alli, and Bebko (2015) recommended universities develop and maintain a mentorship program that includes one-on-one mentor meetings and group social events for autistic students. The researchers mentioned the utilization of multiple models, including “Peer training, support, and mentorship,”

with the ASD Mentorship Program being “developed from a peer mentorship model grounded in student development theory and disability theory” (p.29).

Social Work Values and Ethics

The National Association Social Workers (NASW, 2017) Code of Ethics reminds social workers of the “importance of human relationships” and “that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change” (p. 6). Furthermore, the NASW (2017) reminds social workers “to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities” (p. 6). These social work values and ethics are the backbone of this information report and project. Specifically, the goal of this project is to seek and implement interventions that may improve inclusion and sense of belonging (i.e., close relationship) of Autistic students at UWT. As elaborated within this information report, key stakeholders and previous researchers disclosed a need for social interventions and relationship building within the Autistic community and higher education institutions, specifically on campus at UWT.

Resources

Center for Independence

The Center for Independence (CFI) is in Lakewood and Marysville, Washington, and services are provided to disabled individuals, ages 14 years and older, who reside in Thurston, Pierce, Snohomish, South King, Skagit, Whatcom, Island, and San Juan Island Counties. CFI offers numerous services, including Information and Referral, Independent Living Skills Training, Peer Support, Systemic and Individual Advocacy, Youth Transition, Deinstitutionalization, Summer Workshops and Peer Groups for youth (ages 14-24). The purpose of the CFI (2020) Peer Groups are for individuals to: “support and mentor each other. . . learn

about services and disability-related issues in their local community. . . . [and] get out into the community and have fun together.” Most CFI services have transitioned to remote methods, due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions that limit and eliminate in-person services.

Children’s Therapy Unit: Adults in Training

Children’s Therapy Unit (CTU) is in Puyallup and provides services to children living in Pierce County. CTU manages a long wait list, so a child may need to wait months, possibly more than a year, before acceptance into CTU programs. CTU services end on a child’s 19th birthday, and CTU does not provide referrals to agencies and/or organizations that provide social support services to young Autistic adults (ages 19+). The CTU Adults in Training (i.e., social skills) program teaches teenagers to pretend they are not Autistic and/or neurodiverse. The program “fixes” the “problem” in the teenager, instead of being accepted for who they are. CTU Occupational Therapists rely on eager parents to arrange social time for the teenagers during personal time, instead of CTU staff arranging social gatherings outside of the bi-weekly groups. In my observations over the course of many years, teenagers in these CTU programs are not included in the decision making, instead they are told exactly how to think, speak, and behave, and then harshly punished (including psychological abuse/shaming) in front of the other teenagers as a deterrent of future non-conforming behaviors.

Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetups

Square Pegs Adult Autistic Meetups (2020) are currently available in King, Pierce, and Thurston counties, via Zoom and in-person. Facilitators and members must follow COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Autistic adults (i.e., adults on the autism spectrum) and other neurodiverse adults who are self- and/or professionally diagnosed are welcome to attend Square Pegs Meetup groups. There are more than 20 groups available that vary in focus, style, and demographics

(e.g., non-binary, women, students). The main purpose of these peer groups is to provide a nonjudgmental space for Autistics to make new friends, socialize, share lived experiences, and be part of a community. Zack Siddeek, MSW, is and has been the Square Pegs Organizer since 2008. As part of this “Autism and Inclusion at University of Washington” project, Square Pegs On Campus - University of Washington Tacoma was launched, via Zoom, on December 9, 2020.

UWT Disability Resources for Students (DRS)

Students who have a documented disability, whether permanent or temporary, are eligible to apply for and receive reasonable academic accommodations. These accommodations may include extra time on assignments and tests, a quiet testing area, preferential seating in classrooms, and the conversion of textbooks to audio files. Additionally, due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, eligible students may request a reduced course schedule. DRS does not provide accommodations related to social skills, only academic purposes which may include limited or excused absence from group work and/or in-class presentations that may cause undue stress and anxiety on the disabled student.

UWT Counseling and Psychological Services

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at UWT offers a variety of resources to current students and faculty, at no cost. The available resources include individual counseling and group counseling. Couples counseling is no longer being provided. Support groups are also offered to students experiencing anxiety and need a safe space to share feelings, thoughts, and lived experiences. The available groups include: Build Your Social Confidence Group (BYSC), Understanding Self and Others, Men’s Group, and LGBTQ+ Counseling Group. CAPS do not offer a support group or any specific counseling services to Autistic students.

Key Stakeholder Information

UWT Autistic Students

Two UWT Autistic students requested to participate in the interview process. During the informed consent process (see Appendix C), the graduate-level key stakeholder requested the use of a specific pseudonym, “Cecelia,” instead of their actual name, and the use of she/her pronouns (see Appendix D). The undergraduate-level key stakeholder also requested the use of she/her pronouns and a pseudonym; however, she stated any fictitious name that did not resemble her actual name would be sufficient (see Appendix D).

Graduate Student

“Cecelia” shared “feeling excluded a lot of times and self-excluding as a way of avoiding exclusion by others.” She thinks autism “interferes with social life and wanting intimate relationships.” She stated she always respects her classmates and always feels a lot of respect for people she meets. Cecelia stated no one wants her as part of their group in her master’s program, and no one included her in group projects. She stated all MSW peer groups rejected her in the current master’s program, which is a familiar feeling from her childhood. She did not feel very included at first; however, this has started to improve. She recently began attending Square Pegs Autistic peer groups facilitated by Zack Siddeek, MSW and Square Pegs Meetups Organizer, and planned to attend Square Pegs On Campus - UWT, which started as a virtual peer group on December 9, 2020. Cecelia shared feeling incredibly included while attending Square Pegs virtual groups, and that despite being separate from others due to attending virtually, via Zoom, she felt they (i.e., members of Square Pegs) were together, and the members were kind and supportive. Cecelia suggested more social opportunities for Autistic students on campus. She stated, “Autistics understand one another” and suggested UWT provide social events for everyone to attend, social events that specifically say, “neurodiverse friendly,” so that

neurotypicals know neurodiverse (e.g., Autistic) students will be present, and so neurotypicals will remember to be nice to neurodiverse students. Cecelia recommended these social events include an educational piece for attendees to read prior to the event, so that neurotypicals are educated on neurodiverse individuals. The current situation seems to be that neurotypicals also feel uncomfortable socializing and interacting with neurodiverse individuals. Another suggestion related to social events for everyone, is the use of name tags that include neurodiversity social interaction preferences. For example, only talk to people I know, talk to all people, and talk to no one. Cecelia also recommended new student orientations include autism awareness and education that includes being supportive and sensitive to needs of Autistic students and informing students that bullying of Autistics is egregious and will not be tolerated at UWT. Additionally, Cecelia recommended UWT develop and implement a rule that says students are not allowed to reject Autistic students as part of group work. Numerous other recommendations focused on physical changes to the buildings and structures of the UWT campus. For example, using iridescent lights instead of fluorescent, changing the aim of lights, providing noise cancelling headsets and different texture chairs in classrooms, and establishing an art therapy quiet space for all students.

Undergraduate Student

This key stakeholder, who will be referred to as “Halsey,” viewed autism and inclusion on-campus differently than the graduate student and research literature. Halsey stated she does not recall ever feeling excluded while attending UWT, which she contributed to her being open to peers, classmates, professors and UWT staff about her autism diagnosis, and always being an advocate for accommodations on campus. Halsey voiced support of a peer social support group that will provide a space for an Autistic and neurodiverse community on-campus. Halsey

mentioned asking UWT Autism Center staff about available on-campus peer support groups, when she first began attending UWT, and there were no such peer groups available. She recently received an email from DRS that included information on the new NAMI On Campus: Square Pegs On Campus peer social support group for Autistic and neurodiverse adult students, which she plans to attend at least once. Halsey elaborated on her thoughts by saying despite having friends in “general ed or normal” (motioned with air quotes), “it would be nice to be able to relate to people [who] have the same thing [autism].”

Parent of an Autistic Student

The undergraduate student’s mother also volunteered to be a key stakeholder and requested the use of a pseudonym within this information report. This key stakeholder, who will be referred to as “Ashley,” provided a differing view due to the years she experienced seeking and advocating for services and disability rights for her daughter. Ashley recommended UWT collaborate with local high schools to develop and implement an inclusive approach during the transition from high school to higher education institutions, so that Autistic high school students are encouraged, not discouraged, to attend a higher education institution, such as UWT. Additionally, Ashley recommended UWT provide “a social Meetup start of a group where students on the [autism] spectrum meet each other and kind of share stories and feel like you know they are not alone and some of the struggles I think that would be good.”

UWT DRS Program Coordinator/Accommodations Specialist

The key stakeholder from DRS was Heather Ruitter, an experienced Program Coordinator/Accommodations Specialist at UWT. Ruitter requested the use of she/her pronouns. As part of her DRS duties, Ruitter assists Autistic and neurodiverse students with accommodation requests. She has been working within the education system for approximately 14 years, with

seven of those years at UWT, and is a knowledgeable key stakeholder for this autism/inclusion project. Ruitter is aware of available services on-campus and acknowledged the unmet need of social interventions and/or services sought by Autistic students. Additionally, she shared that “students who are on the spectrum may feel less connected, more isolated,” and she is “always trying to find ways to help and best support students, all students, but especially students on the spectrum,” which is a “tricky thing because what [DRS focuses] on primarily is providing academic and testing accommodations and, so where [Autistic students] often most need support does not really necessarily fall under [DRS accommodations].” Ruitter shared a planned intervention that DRS staff are hoping to implement sooner than later, which is the development of a social space on campus, in the Mattress Factory building. The social space would be a place where neurotypical and neurodiverse students can come together in a “social interaction practice and a no judgment zone,” which Ruitter referred to as “groundbreaking.” In addition to her excitement over the planned “community center” social space, Ruitter voiced her excitement over the autism/inclusion project and hoped to collaborate with Square Pegs On Campus.

UWT Autism Center Director

Dr. Matestic, who is another key stakeholder, is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist and has been the Director of the UWT Autism Center for approximately six years. Dr. Matestic stated she prefers the use of she/her pronouns in this autism/inclusion information report. She has seen gaps in available services and unmet needs of Autistic students. Dr. Matestic is knowledgeable and a well-informed key stakeholder for this autism/inclusion project. There is a limited number of staff at the Autism Center, which has resulted in lengthy waitlists for Autistics seeking services. Another barrier to receiving services is the acceptance of specific insurance. Dr. Matestic recommended interventions that include “helping to educate the students and the faculty about

autism,” using a “strengths-based neuro diverse approach to understanding autism and valuing differences” and “using that kind of language.” In addition to autism awareness on campus, throughout faculty, staff and students, Dr. Matestic shared suggestions an autistic master’s student discussed with her, “the addition of tangible tools within courses. Specifically, actual supports that are built into the coursework or into the practical and that could look like. . . . a set of training or consultations. . . .or it could be checklists. . . . meeting one on one support or just checklists.” Dr. Matestic also mentioned groups like Square Pegs On Campus “will make a huge difference because that's the social component.”

UWT Center for Equity and Inclusion

Additional key stakeholders included staff from the Center for Equity and Inclusion (CEI) at UWT. In lieu of a lengthy interview, busy CEI staff provided information via email. One of the CEI Student Assistants stated they had “not heard of services or resources that are available for autistic and neurodivergent students on campus,” and then referred me to DRS, “as they would know much more on the information.” Additional staff responded anonymously, via email, “I know CAPS on campus has skill and interpersonal student groups, but I would also like to see some peer support groups as well (there's a difference between all three of them),” and “I think having more events and resources (even if it is a flyer or handout) specifically on autistic and neurodiverse students would be helpful to bring awareness. That way more people can know the struggles and how they can be more inclusive towards these students. Partnering with disability resources on this would be helpful too.”

Beginning Need Statement and Potential Intervention

This information report includes feedback from multiple key stakeholders who are supportive of launching an Autistic social support peer group on campus at UWT. These

supportive individuals include UWT DRS staff, Director of UWT Autism Center, UWT students and at least one parent of a UWT student. Additionally, staff from CAPS and UWT Center for Equality and Inclusion (CEI) emailed messages of support. The review of empirical literature articles also included recommendations of social support groups as being a positive intervention for improving inclusion of Autistic students at higher education institutions. External support (i.e., supports outside of UWT) include Zack Siddeek, MSW and Square Pegs Organizer, whom I first met with during December 2019 in anticipation of this MSW capstone project. Due to the support and encouragement, the potential and proposed intervention, Square Pegs On Campus, was launched as a NAMI On Campus resource, on December 9, 2020.

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Appendix A

Problem Map

Societal value that explains why this problem exists:	Ableism: able-bodied/able-minded individuals feel and think they are superior to disabled (body and/or mind) individuals
The cause below is caused by this:	Individuals visually scan a room to find other individuals who look and/or behave the same as they are/do
The cause below is caused by this:	Individuals choose their groups/closest peers; communicate and sit with other individuals with commonalities, similarities
Problem statement below is cause by this:	Division of individuals (cliques) within classes and RSOs; abilities (physically, mentally), race/ethnicity, age, gender, religion, etc.

PROBLEM STATEMENT	Neurodiverse autistic adults / adults on the autism spectrum experience exclusion / limited or lack of inclusion at school.
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The problem leads to this consequence:	Feelings of not belonging in class and/or in college/university
The consequence above leads to this consequence	Withdrawal from classes/college/university
The consequence above leads to this consequence	Isolation, withdraw from society, stay at home
Which costs society:	The exclusion of different, expanded knowledge and skill sets of neurodiverse autistic adults / adults on the autism spectrum who think outside of the neurotypical box.

Appendix B

Force Field Analysis

RESTRAINING FORCES (obstacles or barriers to achieving the goal) Identify 5 policy, attitude, program, resource or other restraining forces	
1	RSO requires minimum of 5 officers
2	Square Pegs organization requires facilitators (e.g., RSO officers) to be self- and/or professionally diagnosed autistic / on the autism spectrum
3	COVID-19 pandemic restrictions
4	Fear of disclosing autism / autism spectrum disorder to peers (self-disclosure)
5	Stigma of autism / autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

GOAL STATEMENT (what you hope is accomplished):
Improve inclusion (i.e., sense of belonging) of autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma by establishing an official Square Pegs Adult Autistic social-support peer group for neurodiverse and autistic students at the University of Washington Tacoma.

DRIVING FORCES (things that support the goal) Identify 5 policy, attitude, program, resource or other supporting forces	
1	Square Pegs peer social-support groups are already established throughout Washington Pierce, King, Thurston, etc.
2	Desire of many neurodiverse / autistic adults / adults on the autism spectrum to connect during groups / in the community
3	Supportive individuals who are autistic MSWs (i.e., Zack Siddeek)
4	Positive feedback by UWT Counseling and Psychological Services staff member during a NAMI on Campus member meeting in 2019
5	Simon Family Endowment Fellowship at UW Tacoma

Informed Consent Form

University of Washington Informed Consent Form

Study: Key Informants re: Autism and Inclusion at Higher Education Institutions

Researcher: Heather Swanson, UW Tacoma Graduate Student; Email: hdswan@uw.edu;
Phone: 253-254-4949

Faculty Instructor: Anindita Bhattacharya, MSW, PhD; Email: ab4050@uw.edu

RESEARCHER'S STATEMENT

I am asking you to be in a research study for a class project. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I would ask of you, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When I have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be part of this study or not. This process is called "informed consent."

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

I am researching the topic: inclusion (i.e., feelings of belonging, being included) of neurodiverse and/or autistic students at higher education institutions. I want to discuss with you any ideas you have about this topic and any potential interventions. You will be asked questions, virtually, either during a focus group with other participants or in an individual interview lasting approximately 30-60 minutes. I may have additional questions to ask you on a casual basis over the course of the next two weeks. I will be asking questions pertaining to your expertise and experiences. The questions will be specific to my topic. You may refuse to answer any questions.

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT

There are no anticipated risks except the time commitment.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

There is no anticipated direct benefit to you. I hope to learn something about autism and inclusion at higher education institutions from professionals and people who have knowledge about this topic. I would be happy to share with you the results of my research and any developed intervention that comes from the research.

OTHER INFORMATION

You may refuse to participate, and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may request a pseudonym (i.e., fictitious name) be used in the research instead of your real name. The interviews and/or

focus groups may be recorded, only with your permission. All recordings and raw data will be deleted and/or destroyed by March 31, 2021.

Participant's Statement

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later about the research, I can ask the student researcher listed above.

I _____ give consent to be interviewed. I am aware my answers will become part of Heather Swanson's Capstone project. I am also giving consent to use my name in the resulting work, unless I request to remain anonymous and/or for the use of a pseudonym (i.e., fictitious name) in the research.

Printed name of subject

Signature of subject

Date

Heather Swanson

Heather Swanson

Printed name of student researcher

Signature of student

Date

Appendix D

Key Stakeholders

Autistic Undergraduate Student (she/her/hers)
Requested Pseudonym: “Halsey” / “Daughter”
University of Washington Tacoma

Parent of Autistic Undergraduate Student (she/her/hers)
Requested Pseudonym: “Ashley” / “Mother”

Autistic Graduate Student (she/her/hers)
Requested Pseudonym: “Cecelia”
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