Barriers to Post Secondary Education for Autistic Learners

This research highlight was developed in partnership with Trent University Durham's Child and Youth Studies program.

Why does this research matter to the autism community?

Many learners face challenges like not knowing how to get accommodations, not having supports that fit their needs, worrying about sharing their diagnosis, and struggling to feel included and accepted by others.[1,6]

This research looks at what autistic students experience in college and university. It shows the barriers they face, the supports that are missing, and how stressful and overwhelming school can be without the right help.[1,7]

What does the research show?

Barriers to support: [2,3,4,5]

- Learners don't get enough help before starting college or university to learn how to speak up for themselves and communicate their needs.
- It can be hard to understand how accommodations work and how to get them.
- Learners worry about stigma or being judged when asking for help.

Gaps in service: [3]

- **Only 15 Canadian institutions offer autism-specific supports.**
- Services can be hard to find, and the quality and types of support can be different.

What students need: [1,6]

- More support is needed to help people build friendships and feel like they belong.
- Environments should be welcoming and accepting of everyone.
- Support is needed for both school success and mental health.

What does this mean?

- Colleges and universities should rethink how learners share their needs, offer more autism-specific supports, and make sure learners understand their rights and the supports available to them.[3,5,8]
- Schools should not use the same supports for everyone. They should offer supports that are planned ahead of time, clearly explained, and tailored to each person's needs.[3]
- Creating welcoming campus spaces, reducing stigma, and providing planned opportunities for connection can help learners feel like they belong and support their mental health.[6]

What's still missing or unclear?

There are very few studies on campus supports that are planned ahead of time, personalized, or designed to meet sensory needs.[8]

Autistic learners are often not included in research about the transition from high school to college or university, so their real-life experiences are not fully understood.[4]

Little research exists on how stigma at school, or rules about sharing a diagnosis, affect students' ability to get accommodations. Learning more about why some autistic students leave college or university could help schools improve their supports and policies.[7,8]

References

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