Autistic Voices in Post Secondary Education

PART ONE

Thriving in Academia:

Navigating University Life as an Autistic Undergraduate in Alberta

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Navigating University Life as an Autistic Undergraduate in Alberta

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Key Messages

The panellists' lived experiences strongly reinforce decades of research calling for systemic change rather than piecemeal or reactive solutions to gaps in post-secondary education for Autistic students. We assert the urgent need for:

- Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
- Sensory-informed campus design
- Streamlined, accessible accommodation processes
- Faculty training and relationship-building
- Intentional peer and community connection spaces

Introduction

This paper synthesizes insights from the first webinar in a three-part series hosted by the Autism Alberta's Alliance Post Secondary Community of Practice. Held on December 2, 2024, the session focused specifically on the university context, bringing together three current and former Autistic undergraduate students and a Neurodiversity Support Advisor from Alberta. The discussion explored the realities of learning, living, and navigating university systems. The panellists' lived experiences echo broad academic literature showing that while Autistic students often enter higher education with strong academic potential, they face significant social, sensory, and structural barriers (Gurbuz et al., 2018; Blaskowitz et al., 2025; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2020).

While future sessions in this series address community college and workplace environments, this panel focused on the distinct barriers, hidden expectations, and strategies relevant to the university experience. The session was attended by 27 participants. The panel featured the perspectives of three students alongside one support professional. Through this series, we aimed to identify strategies for post-secondary institutions, employers, and industry partners to create a seamless continuum of support from the classroom to the workplace.

Demographic Note. All panellists were Canadians. They identified as White (3), Mixed race (White/Indigenous South American Mapuche, 1), non-binary (3) and female (1). The panellists joined from across Alberta's major urban centres, including representation from the Edmonton Capital Region (1) and Southern Alberta (Calgary/Lethbridge, 3)

Agenda

12:00 p.m.: Introduction
12:15 p.m.: Systemic Barriers
12:30 p.m.: The Hidden Curriculum
12:45 p.m.: Strategies and Solutions

Focus	Questions
Systemic Barriers	1. What are some common barriers Autistic students face within post-secondary systems? 2. What should institutions do to improve the experience for Autistic undergraduate students?
The Hidden Curriculum	1. How would you describe the "hidden curriculum"—the unofficial, unwritten lessons learned outside of formal academics? 2. What essential knowledge might students need that isn't directly taught?
Strategies & Solutions	1. Do you have insights or recommendations for navigating undergraduate life? 2. What strategies can help students thrive, and what institutional changes could support them further?

1. Barriers in University Life

The three Autistic students described a set of interconnected barriers that shaped their university experiences, particularly related to sensory overload, social isolation, the emotional demands of masking, and systemic obstacles related to accommodations and medical documentation.

The students consistently described the physical university environment as sensory overwhelming. Campuses were characterized as crowded, noisy, and difficult to navigate, creating barriers to learning and well-being. As JW explained,

> *"sensory barriers, like, honestly, university is super crowded, so it can be really noisy and overwhelming."* – JW

These experiences align with research showing that post-secondary campuses are saturated with competing sensory inputs—such as noise, bright lighting, and crowded hallways—which Autistic students frequently identify as triggers for anxiety and burnout (Waisman et al., 2022). In response to these challenges, students emphasized the need for sensory-informed approaches to campus design. JW underscored the importance of proactively considering sensory access in the built environment:

> *"Pay attention to the sensory inclusion when you're making new buildings, like checking the light levels, the sound levels, etc."* – JW

This call reflects a broader shift away from reactive accommodations toward designing spaces that are accessible by default. Students also stressed that meaningful institutional change depends on listening directly to Autistic people. JW argued that progress requires:

> *"better awareness and acceptance of autism... and talking to the actual Autistic folks at your university about what they need."* - JW

JL provided a concrete example of how such engagement can translate into action, describing the development of the university's first sensory-friendly student lounge:

> *"I developed the first sensory-friendly student space... and we have more embedded into campus now."* – JL

Students reported that these spaces meaningfully reduce stress and support learning, consistent with prior research demonstrating the benefits of sensory-friendly environments for Autistic students (Waisman et al., 2022).

In addition to sensory barriers, students described significant social isolation, particularly in the early years of their programs. JW reflected that:

> *"it's really easy to become socially isolated... especially if you are Autistic and maybe not so good at social stuff and initiating those friendships on your own."* – JW

For some, large class sizes intensified this sense of disconnection. As JW explained,

> "At [my university] it's easy to just feel like a number... in first and second year, there are hundreds of students [per class]... when you get into third and fourth year... it's more manageable." – JW

At the same time, students emphasized the importance of intentional community-building support. JH expanded on the value of designated neurodivergent spaces, noting that

> *"I think having designated spaces like a... neurodivergent club, or like an association or something, could be really helpful... For me, at least, I find it more comfortable to talk to other neurodivergent people, because I know they can at least understand some of the quirks of my behaviour better, and I think it just helps build that sense of community that a lot of neurodivergent students (and other students in general) really struggle to have."* – JH

These reflections align with the literature documenting high levels of loneliness and barriers to belonging among Autistic university students, as well as evidence that neurodivergent student spaces can foster connection and reduce isolation (Gurbuz et al., 2018).

Students further emphasized systemic barriers related to academic accommodations and medical documentation. Obtaining formal accommodations was described as complex, exhausting, and often inaccessible, particularly for students without the financial means or ability to pursue formal diagnostic assessment. JH explained,

> *"I'm self-diagnosed [with autism]... getting tested is expensive and lengthy... even when you get a diagnosis, it's still hard to get accommodations."* – JH

The accommodation process itself—requiring extensive documentation, repeated appointments, and multiple forms—creates its own barrier:

> *"it was so much work... that I ended up just not doing it."* – JH

JL confirmed that these challenges are structural rather than individual, stating,

> *"Access to formal academic accommodations is directly tied to medical, documented proof... which creates a barrier because not everybody has access to assessment and diagnosis."* – JL

These accounts are strongly supported by research indicating that many post-secondary institutions rely on burdensome documentation requirements, lack autism-specific accommodations, and operate systems primarily designed for other disability categories (Ames et al., 2022; Nachman et al., 2022; Nelson et al., 2022; Zeedyk et al., 2019).

Even when accommodations were formally approved, students described inconsistent implementation and, at times, outright dismissal. JH recounted an experience in which accommodation policies failed to account for cumulative exam demands:

> *"Once had two finals on the same day, and went to the accommodations people, saying, "Hey, I don't really have time for this [writing two exams on the same day], because of my extra time on tests. And they said, "Well, sucks to be you". I had a panic attack during the first final because I had another one right afterwards and didn't do well."* – JH

Students also reported encountering disbelief or stigma when requesting accommodations. CC described an instructor who explicitly rejected disability accommodations, stating,

> *"I once had an instructor... she told me she doesn't believe in accommodations... I was asking for an extra three days because I was burned out."* – CC

These experiences reflect broader patterns documented in the literature, which highlight persistent stigma, lack of faculty understanding, and uneven enforcement of accommodation policies across post-secondary institutions (Accardo et al., 2019; Zeedyk et al., 2019).

Finally, students described the emotional and cognitive toll of masking as a critical barrier to persistence in post-secondary education. CC emphasized that masking is often central to being perceived as "high-functioning," noting that:

> *"Masking is the most essential part of the 'high-functioning' [experience]... but it takes a lot of effort."* – CC

They further observed that the cumulative strain of masking contributes to burnout and attrition, explaining that.

> *"I've seen people who have burned out and just had to drop out because it [university] wasn't accepting of them."* – CC

This reflects growing evidence that camouflaging Autistic traits is associated with exhaustion, anxiety, depression, and increased risk of academic withdrawal (Cox et al., 2017; Pyszkowska et al., 2025; Summerill & Summers, 2025).

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how sensory overload, social isolation, systemic accommodation barriers, and sustained pressure to mask intersect to create cumulative and compounding challenges for Autistic post-secondary students — challenges that reflect structural features of university environments rather than individual deficits.

2. The Hidden Curriclum in Post Secondary Education

Panellists described the "hidden curriculum" of university as a set of unofficial, unwritten expectations that shape academic success but are rarely made explicit to students. These expectations extend well beyond academic content and disproportionately disadvantage Autistic students, particularly those who experience challenges with executive functioning, social navigation, and self-advocacy.

A central feature of the hidden curriculum identified by panellists was the assumption of autonomy and strong executive functioning skills. JW explained:

> *"University puts so much emphasis on independence and self-direction... no one explicitly tells you what to do... a lot of things require executive function and personal management skills, which is an area a lot of neurodivergent students already struggle with."* – JW

Unlike structured K–12 environments, universities assume students already know how to manage time, prioritize tasks, navigate institutional systems, plan long-term projects, seek out help, and interpret ambiguous instructions—executive functioning skills that are essential but seldom taught directly. When these expectations remain implicit, Autistic students may be perceived as struggling or disengaged rather than unsupported. Other aspects of hidden curriculum for many students are living on their own for the first time, navigating social atmospheres within and external to the classrooms. This will be covered with another panel.

JH described the hidden curriculum using a powerful metaphor, noting that

> *"It feels like people are given a script, and they just know what to do. And if you don't have that script, it's confusing. I see other people doing all these 'basic' things, and it feels like they have instructions I never got."* – JH

She emphasized that many students arrive at university already knowing "basic" skills aligned with neurotypical norms for communication, independence, and social interaction, leaving Autistic and other neurodivergent students who have a different interactional style at a disadvantage.

Several panellists emphasized that interacting with professors is a key component of the hidden curriculum and one that was both surprising and difficult to navigate. JH explained that learning how to communicate with faculty was not intuitive, noting that

> *"interacting with professors... is difficult to figure out... you have to build that relationship yourself."* – JH

She contrasted this with high school experiences, where teachers were more directive and proactive in monitoring progress. In university, by contrast, students are expected to know when to reach out, how to frame questions, and how to build professional relationships—expectations that are rarely explained but carry significant academic consequences.

JL further highlighted that success in university extends beyond grades and formal achievement. They belied the common belief that universities are meritocracies, explaining that many students believe that if:

> *"you get a high grade point average, then opportunities will open up to you, ... [This] couldn't be further from the truth. It is much more important to know how to navigate the social network: [How to] network in alignment with your academic career goals, develop academic relationships with instructors, and ask for referrals so that you can find a supervisor and have a higher likelihood of being accepted into the program that you're interested in."* – JL

JL underscores that access to research positions, references, and career opportunities often depends on informal relationships and social navigation rather than on academic performance alone. For Autistic students, who may find networking opaque or exclusionary, this represents a significant but largely invisible barrier.

Another key dimension of the hidden curriculum involved disclosure and self-advocacy. CC cautioned that students must learn—often through negative experiences—to

> *"be careful who you tell your autism to... some people talk badly about it."* – CC

Navigating disclosure is an unspoken skill, heavily influenced by institutional power dynamics. While masking is often used as a protective survival strategy, it is also a conditional privilege; not all Autistic people have the ability to camouflage their traits. This creates a double bind in which students must self-advocate yet fear that doing so will label them as 'difficult' or 'less competent' (Gurbuz et al., 2018; White et al., 2017).

At the same time, panellists emphasized that individual faculty relationships can significantly mitigate the challenges of the hidden curriculum. CC described a positive experience with an instructor:

> *"I did find that eventually, I was able to connect with an instructor who was very open to hearing what I needed. He would check in with me throughout the semester and actually take the time to listen to what I had to say. I would talk with him after almost every class, asking things like, 'Is this what I need to know?' It was very helpful."* – CC

Such proactive, relational approaches helped clarify expectations and reduce the burden on the student to decode academic norms independently. These relationships in turn helped make expectations explicit, reduced anxiety, and provided a sense of academic belonging (McPeake et al., 2023).

JL similarly emphasized that accommodations alone cannot resolve structural barriers, stating,

> *"Maybe the problem is with the structure and the way we're doing things. Under a universal design framework, the more options we give people, the more access they have—and the more opportunities there are to participate in meaningful ways."* – JL

These reflections align with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which emphasize proactively embedding flexibility and choice into curriculum design rather than relying on reactive, individualized accommodations. Grounded in neuroscience, the learning sciences, and cognitive psychology, UDL 3.0 offers practical strategies for reducing reliance on the hidden curriculum by making expectations explicit, providing multiple pathways for engagement and assessment, and supporting diverse learners from the outset (Blaskowitz et al., 2025). When implemented effectively— drawing on resources such as the University of Alberta's introduction to UDL — this approach can help shift responsibility away from students navigating unwritten rules and toward institutions creating more transparent, inclusive learning environments.

Overall, panellists' accounts illustrate that the hidden curriculum of university represents a substantial and often unrecognized barrier for Autistic students. This curriculum encompasses executive functioning demands, faculty interaction, networking, disclosure decisions, and self-advocacy. Consistent with the literature, these challenges are not due to a lack of ability but to systems that assume implicit knowledge rather than making expectations explicit and accessible (Gurbuz et al., 2018; White et al., 2017).

3. Student Strategies & Recommendations

Finally, the panellists shared some practical, experience-based strategies they have used to navigate university life more sustainably. These strategies are centred on burnout prevention, proactive planning, and building supportive relationships.

Several students emphasized the importance of pacing and self-acceptance. CC advised students to prioritize well-being over speed, noting,

> *"Do not overexert yourself. It's okay to take a smaller course load. Honestly, it's not something that will negatively impact you in the long run—if anything, it helps prevent burnout and allows you to actually get through it."* – CC

This strategy reflects a recognition that academic success is not solely defined by full-time enrollment or rapid progression through an undergraduate program, but by sustaining class attendance and participation without compromising mental health.

Students also highlighted the value of proactive planning to reduce stress and sensory overload. JW described preparing in advance of the academic term, explaining that:

> *"Some of my strategies include doing as much as possible in advance—like the week before classes start, before the halls get too busy, I take the time to get my supplies from the bookstore, print out my class schedule, and plan my routes between classes. I also try to find a point person, or just one support person."* – JW

They also recommended practical in-class strategies, such as sitting near the front of lecture halls to reduce exposure to noise, movement, and visual distractions. These anticipatory strategies helped students feel more grounded and better able to manage sensory demands once the semester began.

Finally, panellists underscored the importance of identifying at least one consistent source of support within the university. JH emphasized:

> *"I find it's really important to have just one person who can be a good advocate and source of support. It helps if they're a professional—like a mental health or medical professional, or even a professor. I've found it really helpful when I'm struggling with something, feeling alone, or worried I'm doing something wrong."* – JH

These strategies echo the literature emphasizing self-determination, self-knowledge, and proactive planning to support Autistic students' success in post-secondary education (White et al., 2017).

Conclusion

Across student narratives and the broader research literature, a clear and consistent picture emerges: Autistic students enter post-secondary education with strong academic ability, motivation, and commitment, yet are required to navigate university systems that continue to presume neurotypical ways of learning, socializing, self-advocating, and managing sensory and executive demands. The barriers described by panellists—sensory overload, social isolation, the hidden curriculum, burdensome accommodation systems, stigma, and the cumulative toll of masking—are not individual shortcomings but structural features of contemporary university environments.

The panellists' lived experiences strongly reinforce decades of research calling for systemic change rather than piecemeal or reactive solutions. In particular, their accounts point to the urgent need for:

- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** approaches that embed flexibility, choice, and clarity into teaching and assessment from the outset;
- **Sensory-informed campus design** that reduces unnecessary overload and provides accessible, calming spaces;
- **Streamlined, accessible accommodation processes** that do not rely on costly or exclusionary medical documentation;
- **Faculty training and relationship-building**, emphasizing clear communication, flexibility, and relational teaching; and
- **Intentional peer and community connection spaces** that support belonging and reduce isolation for neurodivergent students.

Importantly, panellists also demonstrated that Autistic students are already engaging in thoughtful, proactive strategies to support their own success—through careful planning, pacing, and seeking trusted supports. However, these individual strategies should not be the primary means by which students compensate for inaccessible systems.

Taken together, the insights shared during this panel underscore a critical shift in perspective: improving Autistic students' experiences in post-secondary education is not about "fixing" students, but about redesigning environments, expectations, and structures to be more transparent, flexible, and inclusive. By centring Autistic voices and aligning institutional practices with evidence-based frameworks such as UDL, universities can move beyond mere access toward genuine inclusion—creating learning environments where Autistic students are not just able to persist, but are supported to flourish and thrive.

Background and Moving Forward: Autism Alberta's Alliance Post Secondary Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of diverse members (staff, professors, students) who are all working to move universities towards creating more neuroaffirming campus spaces.

The primary objective of the CoP is to create a supportive and collaborative environment where people from the post-secondary educational system (e.g., students, instructors, researchers, administrators, policymakers) can come together to:

- Share knowledge and experiences, including successes and challenges, relating to supporting Autistic/ND individuals, including students, faculty members and staff
- Share current evidence-informed practices to foster inclusive and effective educational practices
- Co-design and evaluate innovative approaches and interventions address identified challenges/gaps to support Autistic/ND students
- Document the process and make recommendations

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