

DRAFT

Terms of Engagement

Autistic/Neurodivergent (ND) Post-Secondary Community of Practice

Last Updated: November 6, 2023

Our Purpose and Mission

The primary objective of the Autistic/Neurodivergent (ND) Post-Secondary Community of Practice (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

While not research, this CoP draws on ideas from (i) community-based participatory research (CBPR) and (ii) appreciative inquiry (AI) in our community of practice principles. This allows us to use our strengths as researchers steering the committee and sound ethics/transparent approach.

Appreciative Inquiry

We will use an approach that blends appreciative and responsive frames for inquiry to build relationships, develop trust in one another and create a community dedicated to learning. Appreciative Inquiry is grounded in social constructionist thought and is based on the simple assumption that every community, organization, and group has strengths that can be used as the starting point for creating positive change (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). Appreciative Inquiry utilizes interviewing and storytelling to facilitate discovering the strengths and positive aspects of the group, community, or organization under investigation to promote positive change (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008).

Community-based Participatory Approach

By *participatory approach*, “we mean incorporating the views of autistic people and their allies about what ...gets done, how it is done and how it is implemented” (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995 as cited in Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019, p. 943).

Engaging autistic/ND individuals as true partners in our CoP is crucial to ensuring that our work focuses on 'issues of immediate practical concern' (p. 761) to improve autistic/ND well-being, as defined by them (Pellicano et al., 2014).

This team will strive for engagement at the collaborative and shared leadership levels of the Community Engagement Continuum (see table below). Our CoP will include leadership by autistic/ND researchers and autistic/ND people within the community. These perspectives will inform the practices of the CoP, the questions we ask, and the recommendations we create throughout our community of practice. All of these roles will ultimately ensure that the story we are telling and our messages are those which the autistic/ND community is proud of and believe in.

Community Engagement Continuum

From the International Association for Public Participation

<https://www.iap2.org/mpage/Home>

OUTREACH	CONSULT	INVOLVED	COLLABORATE	SHARED LEADERSHIP
Some community involvement	More community involvement	Better community involvement	Community involvement	Strong bi-directional relationship
Communication flows from one to the other, to inform	Communication flows to the community and then back, answer seeking	Communication flows both ways, participatory form of communication	Communication flow is bi-directional	
Provide community with information	Gets information or feedback from the community	Involves more participation with community on issues	Forms partnerships with community on each aspect of project from development to solution	Final decision making is at the community level
Entities coexist	Entities share information	Entities cooperate with each other	Entities form bidirectional communication channels	Entities have formed strong partnership structures
OUTCOMES				
Optimally establishes communication channels and channels for outreach	Develops connections	Visibility of partnership established with increased cooperation	Partnership building, trust building	Broader health outcomes affecting broader community. Strong bi-directional trust built

Autistic/ND Post-SecondaryCoP Steering Committee

- **Chair:** Dr. David Nicholas (RSW, Professor, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary)
- Dr. Heather Brown (Associate Professor, Autistic Advocate, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta)
- Dr. Sandy Hodgetts (OT, Associate Professor, Rehabilitation Medicine, University of Alberta)
- Brooke Leifso (MA, Disabled Applied Researcher, Norquest College)
- Shino Nakane (Provincial Director, Autism Society Alberta)
- Amanda Downey (Alliance Strategist, Autism Society Alberta)

Duties and Responsibilities

1. Establish Processes for Working Together Engage in Virtual Discussions on Specific Priority Areas
2. Collaboratively Develop Recommendations for Change

Establishing Processes for Working Together

The proposed time commitment is 1.5-hour meetings approximately 6 times per year.

Communication

CoP members will be contacted by email approximately one week before each meeting with the documents/information that will be discussed at the meeting. CoP members can suggest meeting items 2 weeks before to be included on the agenda by emailing.

Cameras are optional.

Everyone can choose whether to turn on their camera or keep it off at any point in the meeting. When your internet is unstable, turning your camera off can help improve your connection.

Mute yourself when you're not speaking

An unmuted microphone picks up background noise and creates echoes and feedback loops that cut off the presenter and distract other participants. For the best quality discussion, we request that you mute yourself during the meeting when you are not speaking.

Spoken and text-based communication are both welcome

You are welcome to use verbal (unmute and speak) and text-based methods (messaging in the group chat) to communicate your ideas to the group.

Chat monitor:

At the start of every meeting, someone will be assigned to monitor the chat so everyone's ideas are shared. We will ask for volunteers at the start of each meeting to serve in this role. The chat monitor will read aloud substantive comments so these ideas are discussed and valued. This will prevent parallel or separate discussions in the spoken parts of the meeting and the chat.

Please use the "Raise Hand" feature of the meeting software

We will use the "Raise Hand" feature when we have comments or would like to contribute to the discussion.

Stick to one idea at a time.

To help keep the meetings focused and productive, we ask that each person shares one main idea at a time. This will ensure that others can build or respond to each main idea before we move on to another key point.

Point of information: permission to interrupt when there's a no-go (e.g., it breaks policy, etc)

At times, meetings generate ideas that are not possible and can never move forward for various reasons including, but not limited to, policies, procedures, funding, etc. In these cases, anyone can interrupt the meeting to state the 'point of information' of why the idea can't move forward. This type of interruption helps keep the meeting focused on what is possible.

Assign roles (chair, time-keeper, emotion/vibe-checker, text/chat monitor)

Ahead of each meeting, participants will be assigned to different roles to help keep the meeting organized and flowing.

Goal-directed meetings

To maximize productivity and be respectful of everyone's time, meetings are encouraged to have set goals and points for discussion.

Data-informed goals

Meeting goals may be informed by surveys where group members are asked to rank their priorities regarding the CoP's interests.

Proposed Meeting format

The chair will lead the agenda and use various meeting tools to ensure hearing/reading multiple thoughts with an ideal of hearing as many voices as possible to answer questions or problems. The timekeeper will work alongside the chair so the meeting stays on task. Meeting tools could include timed answers, speaking in a circle, setting a set speaking order, etc.

Center autistic/ND culture in our meetings - organizing the meeting for autistic/ND brains

This group was developed to highlight and amplify autistic and ND voices in post-secondary environments. As such, it is a priority of the CoP to center autistic/ND culture in our meetings, including organizing meetings in a way that is comfortable for autistic/ND participants.

Parking lot

Meetings may generate tangential ideas, questions or issues. The Parking Lot is a running shared document to add these ideas or things to come back to as the CoP or as the steering committee

Questions to Stay with/Tension points

There may be some topics or issues that do not have a definitive answer or best approach due to contrasting or competing needs within the CoP. Tension points then allow reflective questions to be continually addressed. Questions to stay with or tension points will also be noted in shared documents and accessed by CoP members. An example of a question to stay with: how do we support Autistic students with vastly different needs and limitations? This type of question has multiple right answers depending on the situation.

Consensus-Making Process

As we engage virtual discussions on each priority area and develop recommendations from those discussions, we may find that we disagree with the perspective of others. In such instances, we will work collaboratively to reach consensus.

It is typical that after generating ideas, groups enter the groan zone (see figure and explanation below) as they attempt to move from divergence to convergence (Kaner, Lind, Toldi, Fisk & Berger, 2014).

We are likely to experience this as we attempt to reach consensus. It is not an easy place to be.

Consensus-Making Process	
Dialogue	Different views are presented as a means to discovering a new view. The goal is a deeper understanding of each other's perspectives. This is helpful during the brainstorming/diverging stage. Several activities can help, like asking questions, perspective-taking, discussing meanings of keywords; separating facts and opinions, taking tangents seriously, and inviting the participation of the silent.
Discussion	Views are presented and defended, and this may provide a useful analysis of the whole situation. This is helpful during the convergence and consensus stage. Both dialogue and discussion are useful. Teams need a balance of both to move toward decision-making (Senge, 2006).
Groan Zone	Acknowledging the existence and inevitability of the groan zone is a useful step. "Expressing difference is natural and beneficial; getting confused is to be expected; feeling frustrated is par for the course" (Kaner et al., 2014, p. 20).
Consensus	We define consensus as everyone at the table being "able to live with it".

Decision-making mechanism

We will use a modified version of the 5-finger method outlined in Nicolaidis et al., (2011) - Collaboration Strategies in Non-traditional CBPR. We intend to create an environment where it is safe to have different ideas and where divergent opinions are encouraged to make sure we have considered all perspectives. Sometimes, groupthink creates blind spots, which can be mitigated by generating different ideas.

Five Finger Method

Number	Definitions
One finger	I think this is a great idea, and we should move forward with it.
Two fingers	I really don't agree, but I don't want to argue. I think it may help to continue the dialogue.

Three fingers	I don't see it quite the way you do. Let's talk about it some more.
Four fingers	I don't like it, but I can live with it.
Five fingers	I hate this so much that I can't live with having my name associated with it.

When we have a 5-finger call, any 2s, 3s, or 5s means we will continue to dialogue. If we have all 1s and 4s, we will move forward. 5-finger calls will be conducted anonymously using the Zoom polling feature.

Decisions by Email

There is a “silence = compliance” policy with email discussions. If a person does not write back by the deadline, it is assumed they are okay with any decisions the rest of the group makes.

Sharing Our Story

Members will have the opportunity to share our work through the written recommendations that emerge through our discussions of each of the priority areas and public presentations hosted by Autism Society Alberta, Autism Alliance of Canada, and others.

Engage in Virtual Discussions on Specific Priority Areas

We will ask interested stakeholders to complete a brief survey to help determine priorities for our Community of Practice, which seeks to improve post-secondary education opportunities and experiences for autistic and neurodivergent Albertans. The survey lists 15 priorities to improve post-secondary education for autistic and neurodivergent individuals. We will ask respondents to select their top three choices of priorities. They will also be able to identify a priority that is not included in that list.

Our virtual discussions will initially focus on the priorities identified by the respondents to our survey.

List of Priorities in Survey

1. Ensure neurodiversity and intersectionality with neurodiversity are considered in all DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives on campus, including creating mechanisms to address discrimination, developing strategies to increase inclusion and representation, and addressing the unique challenges of neurodivergent campus community members with multiple minority identities.
2. Provide DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) training in neurodiversity and universal design for learning (UDL), a framework to optimize and improve teaching and learning

for everyone based on scientific insights into how people learn (CAST, 2022), to all campus community members.

3. Create Disability Cultural Centers (i.e., physical spaces for neurodivergent faculty, staff and students to connect, build community, and foster a sense of pride in their neurodiversity). Please note that Disability Cultural Centers are different than accommodation and disability support-focused offices.
4. Ensure neurodivergent people are meaningfully and visibly involved as leaders within the university.
5. Neurodivergent peer mentorship (e.g., navigating campus, making connections, self-advocacy, study skill strategies)
6. Provide each neurodivergent campus community member with a single primary contact to coordinate their accommodations in all domains (e.g., housing, classes, student jobs) and allow members to be able to easily and safely switch their primary contact (if desired).
7. Develop flexible accommodations in a collaborative and person-centred manner to meet individuals' specific needs.
8. Do not require updated/recent documentation for permanent disabilities and accept less expensive disability documentation (e.g., from a medical practitioner or therapist).
9. Provide ease of access to diagnosis to obtain necessary documentation
10. Recognize and accommodate sensory discomfort, distraction, distress, and overload across all university contexts (e.g., more choices, address sensory sensitivities related to classrooms, housing, dining, etc., build quiet spaces and/or sensory rooms).
11. Establish supports to ensure a smooth transition into postsecondary such as summer transition programs, staff check-ins, and mentorship programs.
12. Establish supports to ensure a smooth transition out of postsecondary including career supports, connections to partner agencies that develop customized job opportunities, and pre-employment support programs.
13. Improve mental health supports for neurodivergent students by providing free, ongoing supports (rather than short-term, crisis model), hiring counselors with expertise supporting neurodivergent clients, and offering support groups specifically for neurodivergent students.
14. Establish mechanisms to swiftly provide remediation if neurodivergent people are prevented from receiving accommodations.
15. Lessen self-advocacy burden on autistic students, staff and faculty members through structural changes to post-secondary processes and procedures.

Collaboratively Develop Recommendations for Change

The CoP brings together a diverse group of individuals to discuss complex situations, identify barriers, and recommend solutions to these challenges. Bringing together a group of people

with different points of view and lived experiences will help shape the tools and resources we're hoping to create.

To be successful, the group needs to acknowledge and respect each other's experiences and ideas. Be thankful to those who share their stories and present ideas, even if you disagree with them, because every disagreement is an opportunity to start a discussion, and any idea is a building block toward a solution.

Make clear, tangible goals - assign roles with mutual accountability

- 1) **Identify the problem.** As we all know, there are an expansive number of challenges presented to autistic/ND individuals on a daily basis. The first step to reducing these systemic barriers is to identify problems that we, as a collective, are interested in and capable of addressing. This will be done through our List of Priority survey and group discussions.

We are committed to being an impactful and productive group. As such, identified problems should be concrete enough to address with collective action. While we appreciate that individuals may want to discuss large-scale and/or broad-based problems, we want to value the mission of the group and the members' time by concentrating on actionable items.

- 2) **List the variables involved.** It may be intimidating to address the identified problems. To help better understand and deconstruct the identified problems, we will work collaboratively to break down the problem into smaller components or variables. This will make our work less intimidating, more digestible, and better poised to implement a solution.
- 3) **Identify the variables that are outside of your control.** We are not always able to control all the variables or aspects of a problem. By identifying and recording the variables that we are not able to control, we will be able to direct our energy toward variables that we can change more efficiently.

This part will likely be the most frustrating part of the whole process. Our hope is for this not to be a barrier to progress. We will seek to acknowledge all feelings expressed, as possible. It is important to accept that there may be things that cannot be resolved at the moment, and even at those challenging times, move forward in the process towards an executable solution.

This also does not mean that these variables will never be addressed. In fact, such variables can be used to further inform and advance our work together. This means that we can begin understanding these variables outside of this group or at a later time.

- 4) **Identify variables that one can change.** In identifying variables that we cannot control, we will also be able to identify variables that we CAN control. This is crucial to our ability to begin addressing the problems at hand.
- 5) **Identify potential solutions.** The best part! Now that we are properly poised to address the problem, we can identify solutions. This is a deeply collaborative process that will involve referring back to the Consensus Making Process (p. 5) and the Five Finger Method (pp. 5-6)
- 6) **Identify *what* is needed to implement the solution and *who* is needed to help implementation.** An actionable solution will require a concrete plan. A big part of this is accruing supportive stakeholders and resources. The diversity of this group will shine through as all members may bring their own connections and resources to this work.
- 7) **What's the best format for executing your solution?** Once again, we will draw upon the Consensus Making Process (p. 5) and the Five Finger Method (pp. 5-6) to identify the best way to implement our solution.
- 8) **Identify who will do what - roles.** Many hands make light work! To ensure that our group is productive and efficient, we will break down the solution implementation into separate tasks which will be assigned to various members. All members have unique skills to contribute and will be integral to implementing our solutions.
- 9) **Select a deadline to finish the work** (likely a week before the next meeting, but it could be earlier for more complicated issues). To keep the group on track, task deadlines will be set ahead of the next meetings. This will allow all members to review the work done before the next meeting and free up time for discussion and planning.

We are open to all ideas! To ensure that all ideas get their fair share of discussion and are democratically presented, we will discuss them one at a time. If you have a new idea in the middle of a discussion, you can (1) write it down to present next, (2) share it in the chat, or (3) pass it on to the meeting Chair so your thoughts can be presented at the appropriate time. If you choose methods (2) or (3), the Chat Monitor or Chair will help facilitate the presentation of your by stating something like, "Thank you for your idea, [name]. Let's stay in this current conversation and I'll bring it up afterwards." and bringing the idea up again at the appropriate time.

No idea is a bad idea. Everyone in this meeting is here to improve inclusivity, but that may mean something different to them than it does to you. Every step towards inclusivity is a positive one, and feel good that you're a leader in making these changes.

Finally, be kind, compassionate, and understanding. A member has a life outside of this meeting that may affect their participation or the directness of their responses. Remember that everyone in the meeting is here to help, so try not to take disagreement personally.

References

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