

# Library Services for Autistic Students in Academic Libraries: A Literature Review

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## Abstract

Autistic adults and teens are enrolling at universities and colleges at increasing rates, yet many barriers that impede student success still exist. This literature review seeks to identify these barriers, clarify what we know about how autistic students use and perceive the library, and consider what libraries in post-secondary institutions can do to cultivate supportive environments for autistic students. A common theme in the literature is the recognition of a dearth of research on this topic; thus, this literature review aims to identify avenues where further research is necessary to understand the challenges autistic students face in library environments and postsecondary education. Current literature indicates that staff training, relationships with community resources, attention to sensory issues, thoughtful design of physical spaces, adaptations to pedagogical techniques, advocacy for awareness in the campus community, and calls for further research are all necessary aspects of delivering quality library services to autistic postsecondary students. A successful path forward must prioritize representation, inclusion, and consultation with autistic people.

**Keywords:** Library services, academic libraries, college, autism spectrum, ASD, neurodiversity, diversity plan

Increasing numbers of young adults diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are entering postsecondary education and specific interventions are beneficial, if not necessary, for students to achieve academic and social success (Vanbergeijk et al., 2008). Despite this need, many researchers note a dearth of information available for librarians on how to implement supports for adult autistic students in academia (Cho, 2018; Everhart & Anderson, 2020; Pionke et al., 2019; Tumlin, 2019). Autistic students face barriers such as challenges with executive functioning (planning, note-taking, etc.), central coherence (“seeing the big picture”),

rigid/literal thinking, and sensory issues like overreaction to stimuli or hyposensitivity (Cho, 2018). ASDs are also characterized by challenges in social interactions and are often accompanied by anxiety (Vanbergeijk et al., 2008). Knowing these barriers exist and that universities can support autistic students with interventions, what can libraries in postsecondary institutions do to guarantee success for autistic students? How do autistic students view and use the library, and what can librarians do to improve their experience?

Before delving into the research on this topic, it is important to first note the language used in academia. Some researchers advocate for studies that are guided by the social model of disability, which views disabilities like autism as a type of diversity rather than as a deficiency (Anderson, 2018; Shea & Derry, 2019; Tumlin, 2019). There is some degree of tension between traditional academic practice and the social model of disability. For instance, most studies use phrases like “students with autism,” though neurodivergent advocates argue this person-first language is problematic. It suggests autism can be separated from the person, that autism is not important, and that autism is such a negative thing it is not consistent with being a person (Tumlin, 2019). Autism is an adjective describing a person’s identity (Tumlin, 2019), and as such this literature review will use identity-first language (i.e. “autistic person”) that aligns with this perspective.

## Methods

Scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles were considered for inclusion, primarily focusing on original research. Some non-research pieces were included in order to contextualize the data alongside the authentic voices of neurodiverse advocates. This literature review sought to include qualitative and quantitative data that specifically addresses library services to adult and young adult autistic patrons in academic library environments, though due to the aforementioned dearth of literature, the article by Mustey (2019) was still selected despite its situation in public libraries due to overlapping themes. Though there is a wealth of research addressing autistic children in school libraries, the lack of data on adults in university libraries resulted in the application of few limiters. Nearly all of the available articles were published recently (within the past five years) and included North American, Australian, and online

participants. The searches were performed on the Library & Information Science Abstracts (LISA) and Library & Information Science Source databases, as well as the multi-database article discovery tool on the University of Alberta Library website. A diversified search strategy was employed, though most articles were discovered via keyword searches with Boolean operators for the terms "autis\*," "librar\*," and "academic OR university OR college." This literature is organized thematically to address some of the major barriers to autistic students in academic libraries.

### **Information Seeking Behaviors & Pedagogy**

There seems to be little conclusive evidence about the information-seeking behaviours of autistic postsecondary students. Everhart & Escobar (2018) sought to shed light on wayfinding and material searching strategies in an academic library using wearable cameras. However, their sample size of one autistic person and one neurotypical person, along with a selection process that proffered an especially gregarious autistic volunteer, provides results offering sparse guidance. Contrary to their expectations, the autistic student relied more on staff and the neurotypical student on the library website, and they identified that enablers and barriers were similar for both students in each of the tasks. Ethnographic methods like theirs could be useful for further research into information-seeking behaviour. In online responses, autistic students report that they use library resources to browse, borrow, research special interests, serendipitously discover new interests/resources, seek information on sensitive topics; they also report that the variety of interesting materials can even be a distraction (Anderson, 2018). Perhaps Remy and Seaman's (2014) suggestion to showcase materials on autism could be applied to materials on popular special interest topics (Barnhill, 2016) in order to attract and welcome autistic students.

Interactions with staff are not an overly valued aspect of library services for this user group; Anderson (2018) concludes there is "a clear lack of engagement" (p. 654) between autistic students and librarians in academic libraries. Staff are often described as "strict," and users report they have been frequently shushed or even kicked out (Anderson, 2018). Students report having negative interactions with librarians stemming from the librarians' lack of empathy and insensitivity to their disability, and they express further exasperation that student employees do not deliver the expertise they require

(Pionke, 2017). Researchers suggest librarians can adapt their communication and teaching styles during reference interviews for each individual (Cho, 2018; Remy & Seaman, 2014), though there is little focus in the literature on how to tailor reference interviews to neurodivergent patrons. Library staff relationships with autistic users is clearly an area that requires improvement.

Traditional modes of scholarship in academic libraries may not be serving autistic students appropriately. Common methods assume that students are able to interact with course materials in certain ways that may not be possible for autistic students; specifically, social and communicative interactions expect students to write broadly across genres, demand more from working memory than most autistic students are capable of, and expect a high level of Theory of Mind (the ability to see and empathize with emotions and thoughts) that autistic students are slower to develop (Carey, 2020). Inclusive pedagogy requires supports for autistic students in order to overcome these barriers which can manifest as research strategy courses targeting the needs of autistic students, teaching strategies for interacting with existing systems, and using new research strategies to help students develop information literacy skills (Carey, 2020). When teaching students how to evaluate information, strategies must be deployed in real-world contexts and not simply explained (Cho, 2018). Autistic students benefit from multi-sensory teaching styles, increased visual content, more written explanations, simplified processes, reflective activities in place of social ones, linking new information to familiar information, explanations of classification systems for locating materials, and individualized appointments (Remy & Seaman, 2014). Librarians may not receive advanced notice that a class requires accommodations, and thus must always be prepared (Remy & Seaman, 2014). Considering that many students do not self-report their diagnoses (Carey, 2020), inclusive pedagogical practices should be considered in information literacy lesson design.

### **Staff Training and Professional Development**

A nearly universal call from the literature is the assertion that further training is needed for library staff to understand the needs of neurodiverse patrons. The demand for professional development comes from two primary perspectives. The first perspective calls for training to implement specific initiatives such as programs,

collection additions, or events, as Mustey (2019) does in their public library's pursuit of neurodiverse adult reading clubs and Sensitive Santa visits for children. Everhart & Anderson (2020) assert that the goal of training is to increase librarians' motivation to implement intervention strategies for autistic users, which covers an enormous range of possible outcomes.

The second major reason to implement training is so that library staff can communicate better with autistic patrons. Pionke et al. (2019) explains that education can help practitioners understand common features of ASD communication, such as differences in body language, lack of eye contact, and being less verbal. Cho (2018) suggests adapting communication styles to match autistic patrons, which requires an understanding of ASD. Pionke (2017) takes a unique angle amid other studies, suggesting that library staff use mindfulness techniques in order to develop empathy to better serve autistic patrons during interactions. Conversely, lack of training could lead to counterproductive interactions between autistic students and library staff (Shea & Derry, 2019) and students themselves have expressed frustration at the lack of library staff training for handling disabled patrons (Pionke, 2017). Rogers-Whitehead (2020) adds a vital consideration: a librarian may dedicate their time to quality programming for neurodivergent patrons, but their efforts are thwarted if students are not made to feel welcome in libraries. This is achieved when all staff are adequately trained to serve autistic patrons and when policy is audited for inclusivity to support productive communication.

Suggestions for types of training include free online modules like Project ENABLE (Pionke et al., 2019), outside training from community support services (Mustey, 2019), books and DVDs (Mustey, 2019), self-education (Cho, 2018), utilization of resources like university disability offices (Cho, 2018; Remy & Seaman, 2014), workshops (Mustey, 2019; Remy & Seaman, 2014), discussions with experts, and team-building exercises including role-play (Remy & Seaman, 2014). The only study to evaluate types of training and their outcomes is Everhart & Anderson (2020), which compares the results of online training on its own, online training combined with coaching, and existing autism support programs. Through pre- and post-testing, as well as focus groups, they found that coaching, in combination with online instruction, was

the most effective among the tested training strategies for increasing knowledge of autistic patrons and shifting attitudes toward desiring further education and initiatives in the library. Their qualitative analysis revealed the addition of coaching to a training regimen “facilitated changes in workplace behavior and awareness” (p. 6) not measured in their questionnaire, especially given the added opportunities to reflect between coaching sessions. The focus groups indicated that library staff were motivated to implement positive changes after completing online modules; however, since the information therein was not specifically targeted to academic libraries, they felt compelled to explore the needs of the college population. Though the article does not call for targeted resources, this finding indicates there may be demand for training resources oriented toward academic library contexts.

### **Liaising with Community Resources**

Acting in conjunction with support services within the community is a key strategy for libraries. Several researchers recommend liaising with support services (Carey, 2020; Cho, 2018; Pionke et al., 2019; Remy & Seaman, 2014). Pionke et al. (2019) reported on the Students with Autism Transitional Education Program (STEP) that took place in the library and suggested STEP could offer targeted library instruction to graduate assistants each year. Cho (2018) suggests librarians can create relationships with students by engaging in various places across campus, arrange for disability resource offices to make referrals to library staff and programs, and collaborate with faculty. Libraries can coordinate departments and services across campuses, increase the quality of support services and instruction, provide academic coaching and mentor relationships, and ally with mentors to enhance services (Carey, 2020).

Although Mustey’s (2019) research is somewhat of an outlier because it addresses a public library, community partnerships with several disability associations were crucial to their approach. Organizations contributed by gifting collection materials, providing consultation and support, guiding collection development, providing training, or implementing affiliate programs. They conclude that without these vital partnerships, they could not “work in isolation and assume what [they] are doing is actually meeting the needs of people within our communities” (p. 84). Additionally, as previously stated, many students do not disclose their diagnosis and therefore don’t receive the supports

they are entitled to (Anderson, 2018; Carey, 2020). Thus, partnerships are vital to enhance other aspects of college resources for autistic students via the library like improved staff training, collections, and environments, as well as mutually extending the reach of both the library and the resources centres.

Working in coordination also creates opportunities that may not otherwise exist. Pionke et al. (2019) and Cho's (2018) studies were only possible because of their relationships with STEP and the Bridges to Adelphi programs respectively. Everhart & Escobar (2018) were able to recruit an autistic volunteer from a previous study; however, relationships with autistic support programs could also open these communication channels for recruitment. Liaising can open doors to new research and thereby advance scholarship on services to autistic adult students.

### **Sensory Experiences**

The sensory elements of physical spaces are a common concern. Fluorescent lighting, excessive noise, signage, and other environmental factors can contribute to overload (Shea & Derry, 2019). Mustey (2019) attempted to combat these forces by completing a literature review, survey, and focus group consultation to design a sensory audit checklist that looks at "lighting, smells, sounds, visual impacts, signage, wayfinding, staff awareness, fabrics, colors, etc." (p. 85). Both positive and inhibitory experiences can exist in library environments, particularly with respect to sound or noise (Anderson, 2018). The library is frequently described as overly loud or distracting; however, adapting to the social norms of an overly quiet environment can also be stressful (Anderson, 2018). Auditory concerns can be addressed with obvious signage directing to areas intended for quiet study and for socialization, as well as hand-outs in person and online that identify quiet and collaborative spaces so autistic students can plan their visit and know what kind of behaviour is expected according to clear policies (Anderson, 2018).

Designated spaces can help overcome sensory issues. The Bridges to Adelphi program has its own spaces for studying and socializing alongside a sensory room to "decompress and escape to" in the event of sensory confusion (Cho, 2018, p. 326). This aligns with Anderson's (2018) observation that sound-proofed study rooms and private study carrels are received positively by autistic students. Study rooms can also simplify

the environment; accessories to shield from the public view (like shields or shades) further tame feelings of being watched, insecurities about social behaviour, and anxiety that is common for autistic students (Anderson, 2018; Pionke et al., 2019).

### **The Library as Place: Adapting Physical Environments**

The library can fill a meaningful role in the lives of autistic postsecondary students. The library is oft described as a haven or place of refuge (Anderson, 2018; Pionke et al., 2019; Remy & Seaman, 2014). To many this means a quiet place to study and escape distractions (Anderson, 2018; Pionke, 2017; Pionke et al., 2019), however libraries are sometimes perceived as places for social opportunities. The library can be a place to read books about social interaction, to socialize inside the building itself, to use knowledge about the library to support interactions, to express special interests that create opportunity for social engagement (i.e. playing Pokémon), or as a place to meet for study groups (Anderson, 2018). Though Barnhill (2016) doesn't address libraries specifically, they point to support services that libraries could implement that coincide with Anderson's observation that special interests can create connection in library spaces. Barnhill (2016) suggests events and clubs for autistic young people, or even social groups on special interest topics that are often popular with autistic students (e.g., anime, LARPing, and history) can help autistic students to adapt to university.

Some academics call for Universal Design (UD) as a solution to make library spaces more inviting to autistic students (Pionke, 2017; Remy & Seaman, 2014). Universal Design seeks to "design products and environments that are maximally usable for all" (Remy & Seaman, 2014, p. 27). The concepts of UD are often applied in architecture, though they are applicable to other aspects of design as well, such as curricula. There are specific areas where buildings can be improved for autistic students: lighting is a commonly cited issue (Mustey, 2019; Pionke et al., 2019; Remy & Seaman, 2014); ample quiet spaces are necessary (Anderson, 2018; Pionke, 2017; Pionke et al., 2019); equipment must be in good order (Remy & Seaman, 2014); and lack of food services can cause disruptions as students are unable to avoid leaving the library (Pionke, 2017; Pionke et al., 2019). Signage can be an important tool to enable better wayfinding (Everhart & Escobar, 2018), and so libraries may wish to have a sign committee to ensure appropriate labeling of stacks, washrooms, service points, unique

room configurations (Pionke et al., 2019), as well as areas for quiet study and for socialization (Anderson, 2018). When steps are taken to make the library a welcoming place, it contributes to the overall academic and social success of autistic students (Anderson, 2018). To autistic students, the library can be a quiet place to study, a place to make social connections, or a place to escape from sensory overload on the campus or in their dorm. Librarians can respond by considering how space is used and how space is labelled to meet these needs.

### **The Librarian's Role in Advocating for Neurodiversity**

A rallying cry of researchers on autism in academic libraries is the assertion that libraries must educate their communities at large to raise awareness and advocate for inclusive practices (Anderson, 2018; Carey, 2020; Remy & Seaman, 2014; Shea & Derry, 2019). Campus communities that are knowledgeable about autism are more likely to contribute toward student success (Anderson, 2018), while enhanced peer knowledge fosters greater social opportunities for students (Shea & Derry, 2019). Strategies for raising awareness include improving personal or professional knowledge (Mustey, 2019, Pionke et al., 2019; Remy & Seaman, 2014) as well as through library programming such as promoting Autism Awareness Month in April, inviting speakers, hosting panel discussions, showcasing library materials on ASD, screening documentaries, thereby establishing the library as the “destination” for autism-related things (Remy & Seaman, 2014). The importance of including and elevating neurodiverse voices cannot be overemphasized — self-advocacy via collaborations with autistic people and organizations run by autistic people should be used over “experts” wherever possible (Shea & Derry, 2019).

Although this literature review addresses services from a user perspective, it is also worth noting the absence of autistic employees in the profession. Eng's (2017) interviewee commented on how literature about neurodiversity in libraries is stilted towards the theme of accommodating neurodivergent patrons rather than staff. Disabled activists unite under the slogan “nothing about us without us” (Charlton, 1998), emphasizing the importance of representation and advocating for the value of inviting more diverse voices to join library communities as part of the advocacy work librarians are doing. Some ways that this can be further explored include increased efforts to hire

more diverse library workers, as well as incorporating strategies for intervention in library settings. Everhart and Anderson (2020) determined that a library's decision to implement diversity hiring initiatives was a side effect of increased training about autism, as the library responded to the need for inclusion. Positive Behavioural Support, an intervention style that replaces destructive behaviours with healthier ones, is heavily researched in schools and group homes but has only been investigated in a library setting to retain a single autistic employee (Lund, 2018). Diverse hiring initiatives and diversity residency programs (Eng, 2017) alongside intervention strategies (Lund, 2018) can allow libraries to become leaders in inclusive employment and contribute to greater awareness and practices for the entire campus community.

### **The Researcher's Role in Advocacy**

Beyond advocating for neurodiverse patrons within libraries and colleges, we must amplify autistic voices in research as well. Certain issues exist in the scholarship in terms of excluding autistic persons and fostering an "exclusionary and ableist environment" (Tumlin, 2019, p. 3): neurodiversity is rarely discussed; neurodiverse voices are a severe minority in the field; research often focuses on neurodivergent children as subjects and neurotypical adults as readers; non-typical writing styles are rejected; and the field tends to use counterproductive language and theories like person-first terms and the medical model of disability (Tumlin, 2019). Anderson (2018) reiterates this last issue, admitting they used functional labels (i.e., "high-functioning") despite their controversial nature because they are common within the literature.

Eng (2017) expresses that, in their experience as an autistic librarian, libraries tend to focus a great deal on diversity, yet they rarely mention the neurodivergent. Several researchers also note a tendency in current literature to talk *about* autistic people rather than *with* them, or to address only those around them like parents and educators, calling for further research that directly addresses the autistic experience (Anderson, 2018; Everhart & Escobar, 2018; Pionke, 2017; Pionke et al., 2019; Shea & Derry, 2019). At the time of its publishing, Everhart and Escobar's (2018) article observed only one other study that directly addressed autistic people about library usage and barriers. If this is true, it seems that, while interest in the experiences of adult autistic library users is undergoing a nascent growth, it is still underrepresented in the

literature. Further research is necessary to engage directly with and by autistic people in order to further understand their experiences and needs.

The dearth of scholarship on this topic led Everhart and Anderson (2020) to create a practical guide for academic libraries (Everhart et al., 2018). This manual is an excellent resource that features autistic perspectives and demonstrates an exemplary model for how researchers can advocate for autistic inclusion.

### **Analysis and Commentary**

This literature review seeks to identify some areas of concern for academic librarians to consider in order to create inclusive environments for adult autistic students. In truth, much of the research on this topic is too sparse and limited to draw authoritative conclusions from. With rising numbers of identified autistic students entering universities (Vanbergeijk et al., 2008) and the unknown numbers of those who choose not to disclose their autism or remain undiagnosed, it is clear that further research is necessary to develop a true set of guidelines that academic libraries can use to improve their services and environments for autistic users. Though the Everhart et al. (2018) guide deftly consolidates what we know about autistic services in libraries, much of our scholarship relies on cross-disciplinary transference, small-scale primary investigations, geographically localized and non-diverse research, and a small body of connected researchers.

Information about autistic information-seeking and wayfinding behaviours is similarly sparse. Everhart & Escobar (2018) sought illumination on these topics through ethnographic methods, but their sample was limited to one autistic student and one non-autistic control participant. Anderson's (2018) data comes from firsthand comments, but they are made by anonymous online users. Developing understanding of these key elements of library use is essential in order to develop meaningful guidelines for autistic inclusivity, yet much remains undiscovered.

The outcomes of increased autism training are promising. After participating in Everhart & Anderson's (2020) pilot training programs, one library went on to apply for and receive a grant to expand their autistic fiction collection, while another sought assistance from their disability resource center to hire autistic students to work on tasks other than shelving, and to broaden their diversity hiring initiative for librarians.

However, this is but a small sample of measurable deliverables. It is clear that more research is necessary to determine the effectiveness of different training strategies in correlation to the intended outcomes.

Greater observation and investigation of how autistic students use libraries, and the barriers they encounter leading up to and during their visits, could help libraries to create spaces that better accommodate neurodiverse patrons. While the literature is relatively unanimous in acknowledging that sensory issues are a concern for autistic students, the observations and recommendations for improvement are from limited data sets. The main source available is by Anderson (2018), whose methods involved qualitative content analysis of comments made by self-identified autistic students on an autistic support website called Wrong Planet. Cho's (2018) observations from a specific autistic support program and Pionke et al.'s (2019) seven interviews supplement this data. A comprehensive, multi-method approach to expanding this field of knowledge would be beneficial in order to create a set of reliable guidelines libraries could use to create more accessible environments.

## **Conclusion**

Autistic support in academic libraries requires a multi-layered approach in order to understand the needs of this user group and deliver appropriate services accordingly. Current literature indicates that measures such as staff training, the cultivation of relationships with community resources, attention to sensory issues, thoughtful design of physical spaces, adaptations to pedagogical techniques, advocacy for awareness in the campus community, and calls for further research are all necessary aspects of delivering quality library services to autistic postsecondary students. Though some researchers allude to resources that should be available online (Anderson, 2018; Everhart & Escobar, 2018), there is little to no discussion on how library websites, online resources, and electronic education tools can aid autistic students. Researchers note few studies in the LIS field discuss autistic adults specifically (Anderson, 2018; Pionke et al., 2019). Moving forward, more research is required to determine whether library interventions are successful and, as always, consultation with and inclusion of autistic individuals is key for devising improved strategies for serving autistic populations.

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