Introduction

The traditional college setting is being challenged as students on the autism spectrum enter postsecondary education. This presents trials for students with ASD, as “failure by universities to provide social supports would substantially impair the student's ability” to reach the goals of developing social skills and forming relationships (VanBergeijk, Klin & Volkmar, 2008).

One method of providing resources is the provision of formal and informal ‘safe spaces’ on campus to accommodate students with ASD, where they can self-regulate and feel prepared to accomplish the aforementioned objectives. Such spaces help students overcome potential barriers to academic and social engagement, thereby facilitating students’ growth and success. The disruption of the status quo by the introduction in the past few decades of new legislation protecting the rights of people with disabilities, including ASD, has opened the path for these individuals to seeking higher degrees. While formal supports currently help students academically, there needs to be a greater emphasis on the holistic view of the students in higher education. Safe spaces on campus are a unique resource where current and future students can benefit.

Objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine the need for safe spaces on college campuses as sustainable resources for students with ASD, from the perspectives of students with ASD who have postsecondary education experience. Safe spaces offer a place where students can be themselves and be free from an otherwise overwhelming environment. The study ultimately aims to identify whether and how safe spaces might facilitate college success for students with autism.

Methods

Data were collected from a virtual platform for individuals with ASD, wrongplanet.net. Discussion threads were collected from the “School and College Life” board. Using Astin’s Inputs-Environments-Outputs (IEO) framework, four researchers coded data in three separate rounds, with inter-coder reliability established by joint coding during the first round. Both procedural and thematic memos were taken throughout the coding process.

Results

Safe spaces in the college environment provide a place for these students to escape stressors and regulate their senses. The college environment can be overwhelming and potentially hostile. These students expressed experiencing anxiety about certain college experiences, difficulties with social interactions, and feeling overwhelmed by new environments.

“I ended up having a serious meltdown due to overstimulation. It took me two months to recover.”

Safe spaces in the college environment provide a place for these students to escape stressors. Despite the disruptive nature of the college settings, students with ASD reported safe spaces helped them to alleviate anxiety and propel success.

“Sometimes I was so overwhelmed with nerves/fear that I would avoid going to the cafeteria for dinner and just eat something like popcorn in my room.”

Emotional safety may help students avoid active isolation. This may help them avoid overwhelming stimuli and self regulate appropriately.

“You need to secure some solitary hangout spots in and around campus. A hidden nook of the library, a café off-campus that’s open late, etc.. Make it so you don’t need to come back until your roomie(s) are asleep.”

Discussion

College students with ASD need places into which they can retreat when feeling overloaded. Safe spaces provide the opportunity to process information in a secure setting. Safe spaces should enable separation from social environments, provide security, and vary to meet individual students’ needs. These spaces may be pre-existing physical spaces, but may also include virtual systems. Moreover, institutional policies can enable temporal safe spaces by providing students adequate time to process all the necessary information before making a decision. It is essential that the growing population of postsecondary students with ASD view institutional environments as conducive to their well-being.
Seeking Safe Spaces

Autistic Students Finding Places to be Themselves on College Campuses

By Abby Wolz

Background:

The traditional college setting is being challenged as students on the autism spectrum enter postsecondary education. This presents trials for students with ASD, as "failure by universities to provide social supports would substantially impair the student’s ability" to reach the goals of developing social skills and forming relationships (VanBergeijk, Klin,& Volkmar, 2008). One method of providing resources is the provision of formal and informal ‘safe spaces’ on campus to accommodate students with ASD, where they can self-regulate and feel prepared to accomplish the aforementioned objectives. Such spaces help students overcome potential barriers to academic and social engagement, thereby facilitating students’ growth and success.

Objectives:

The purpose of this paper is to examine the need for safe spaces on college campuses as sustainable resources for students with ASD, from the perspectives of students with ASD who have postsecondary education experience. Safe spaces offer a place free from an otherwise overwhelming environment.

Methods:

Data were collected from a virtual platform for individuals with ASD, wrongplanet.net. Discussion threads were collected from the "School and College Life" board. Using Astin’s Inputs-Environments-Outputs (IEO) framework, four researchers coded data in three separate rounds, with inter-coder reliability established by joint coding during the first round. Both procedural and thematic memos were taken throughout the coding process.

Results:

Students with ASD reported the college environment can be overwhelming and potentially hostile. These students expressed experiencing anxiety about certain college experiences, difficulties with social interactions, and feeling overwhelmed by new environments. Said one student, "I ended up having a serious meltdown due to over stimulation. It took me two months to recover.”

Safe spaces in the college environment provide a place for these students to escape stressors. Despite the disruptive nature of the college settings, students with ASD reported safe spaces helped them to alleviate anxiety and propel success. One student found alternatives to spaces where he felt overwhelmed, saying "Sometimes I was so overwhelmed with nerves/fear that I would avoid going to the cafeteria for dinner and just eat something like popcorn in my room.” Another student had strategies of active avoidance. "You need to secure some solitary hangout spots in and around campus. A hidden nook of the library, a café off-campus that’s open late, etc.. Make it so you don't need to come back until your roomie(s) are asleep.”
Conclusions:

College students with ASD need places into which they can retreat when feeling overloaded. Safe spaces provide the opportunity to process information in a secure setting. Safe spaces should enable separation from social environments, provide security, and vary to meet individual students’ needs. These spaces may be pre-existing physical spaces, but may also include virtual systems. Moreover, institutional policies can enable temporal safe spaces by providing students adequate time to process all the necessary information before making a decision.

It is essential that the growing population of postsecondary students with ASD view institutional environments as conducive to their well-being. The creation of safe spaces is one promising means of doing so.