UCLA Tarjan Center
ACCESS Newsletter

Advancing **C**ollege **C**apacity for **E**quitable **S**tudent **S**uccess

WELCOME!

This newsletter aims to provide a convenient and current resource for information related to postsecondary education for students with developmental disabilities, such as autism and intellectual disability. While our primary focus will be on content relevant to the California Community College system, much of the newsletter will have broader applicability.

IN THIS ISSUE

CAMPUS SPOTLIGHT: GOLDEN WEST COLLEGE

RESEARCH INSIGHTS: STIMMING

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING TASKFORCE

CALIFORNIA MASTER PLAN FOR DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICES

RESOURCE: THINK COLLEGE

Campus Spotlight:

Autism Acceptance at Golden West College

What began in 2014 as a small monthly meeting with a handful of students has grown into a vibrant support system at Golden West College. Led by Denise Gonzalez Bon, The College Autism Program (CAP) now serves 180 DSPS-registered students and centers around "The Loop"—a weekly group held in person and on Zoom where autistic students can connect and receive support from peers and staff.



Denise built and grew CAP based on what the students needed in real time. She has been intentional to incorporate student input from the very beginning, including using student-designed artwork and logos.

Leadership from within the autistic community has helped guide the program's direction. Casper Joy, CAP's project coordinator and a graduate of Golden West College, shared that "being around an autistic community has made me so much more accepting of myself. It's had a huge impact on how I look at the world and myself, because I can't tell others to accept themselves without doing the same."

Campus Spotlight: Autism Acceptance at Golden West College

Each year, Autism Acceptance Month is one of the College Autism Program's biggest initiatives. Initially launched as a week of events, it has since expanded into a month of campus-wide programming.

Check out some of this year's events:

This reflects the ongoing work at Golden West College and CAP to build an inclusive, supportive campus where autistic students can thrive. "It's sort of a micro view of how the world is changing," Casper said. "It's really nice to see that so proudly and visibly at our school." For colleges looking to start similar programs, Denise recommends starting simple, such as by hosting low-cost events. "If anyone has questions, they can always reach out to us," Denise said.

2025 Autism Acceptance @ GWC

Neurodiversi-TEA

Snacks, Boba, and an open chat about neurodiversity

Educational Webinars

Discussions of classroom best practices, intersectional identities

Mario Kart Tournament

Hosted by CAP students - hang out, play, and connect

Student Autism Ally Event

Psych Club invited to learn more about autism and autistic student experiences

Career Success Session

Session for students to learn about the Career Center and meet its staff





Research Insights:
Autistic experiences of stimming

Stimming refers to repetitive behaviors such as hand-flapping, rocking, or repeating words. Clinically classified as restricted, repetitive behaviors (RRBs)—which is one of the two main diagnostic criteria for autism—these actions are sometimes viewed "disruptive" or "abnormal." However, research shows many autistic individuals use stimming as a helpful strategy for managing anxiety, self-regulating, and staying focused. In one of the largest studies to date, with over 200 autistic participants, new research points to some clear takeaways regarding the autistic experience of stimming.

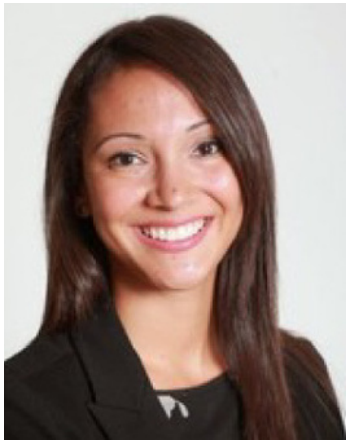
- **Over 90% of autistic people described stimming as sometimes or always a positive experience.**
- **Autistic people connected stimming to experiencing emotions, such as anxiety, frustration, and excitement.**
- **Most said stimming helps them communicate and connect with other neurodivergent people.**
- **More than 75% reported suppressing stims, mainly to avoid stigma, judgment, and safety concerns.**

Colleges can:

- Provide education to faculty and students on stimming, what it looks like, and its purpose.
- Normalize and allow for stimming through classroom policies, seating options, fidgets, and other tools.
- Help instructors and staff know how to intervene if a stim is significantly disruptive or self-injurious.

Morris, I. F., Sykes, J. R., Paulus, E. R., Dameh, A., Razzaque, A., Esch, L. V., ... & Zelazo, P. D. (2025). Beyond self-regulation: Autistic experiences and perceptions of stimming. Neurodiversity, 3, 27546330241311096.

The California Community College Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Taskforce



The UCLA Tarjan Center was joined by Stormy Miller Sabia, Ed.D., a member of the taskforce to hear more about its progress and plans. Dr. Miller Sabia is the Dean of Academic Counseling and Student Success at West Valley College and a champion for college students with disabilities, including those with developmental disabilities as a former coordinator of the College to Career program in San Diego Community College District. Responses have been lightly edited for clarity.

Q: What is the UDL Taskforce, and what are its main goals?

The UDL Taskforce came out of listening to the community voicing a need for universal design for learning in the CCC system. Its vision is equitable access, success, and completion for all of our diverse learners. It represents a number of constituents and stakeholders who were brought together by the Chancellor's Office, including DSPS, CAPED, IT, Statewide Academic and Student Senates, Chief Instructional Officers, Chief Student Services Officers, and more. We were also joined by CAST, who are experts in this area and helped facilitate the discussions of the taskforce.

Q: What has the progress been so far?

That first phase of the work was developing baseline recommendations, and the second phase will be focused on implementation. So far, we've come together to hear from experts about UDL for all, discuss topics such as academic stress, and broaden our view of accessibility. Some of the taskforce members attended UDL-Con to learn and draw from the implementation in other systems. The culmination of our work so far was a final draft of the emerging recommendations, which leaned into our communication plan across the system and also discussed the need for professional development tailored to specific roles. We were thinking intentionally about the roll out, technology implications, infrastructure, and equity. We wanted folks to be able to connect the dots that when we're talking about equity and DEI, we're talking about accessibility and UDL. Though the taskforce is currently on pause during the search for a new vice chancellor, those recommendations will be released in the future.

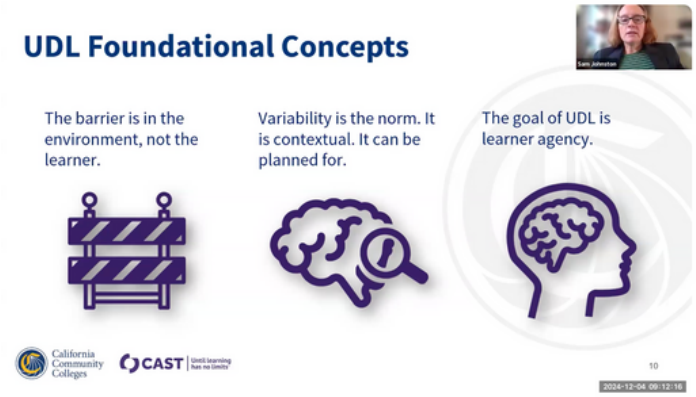
Q: How do you see the end result impacting neurodivergent college students?

When we think about UDL, we think a lot about the classroom. But as someone who largely works in student services, I saw it as an opportunity to also be transformative in that space, in thinking about how we serve all students, inclusive of neurodivergent college students. One of the examples we mapped as part of our taskforce work was requesting a transcript - what is the process, what are the pain points, what are the multiple ways we can engage students? We talked about solutions to

reduce financial burden and simplify options offered. We recognized equity issues in the process being so reliant on websites, links, and certain terminology and language, because that might not work well for everyone. And being more empathetic to the student experience navigating the process. So often, there can be a deficit perspective if a student doesn't follow our process that it is their fault rather than considering flaws in the design. This reflective work not only benefits students who identify as having a disability, it benefits our entire system. It really is representative of trying to lift up the identities of students, allowing individuals to access and express themselves in different ways while still demonstrating understanding of process and learning outcomes.

Q: What are some of your favorite UDL strategies that you've used yourself or that an instructor can start using today?

For me, the idea of journey mapping. I appreciated the way it was broken down – first, what are the steps and activities involved in say, requesting the transcript. Then what are materials and tools used. What is the emotional journey of this task? It gives us insights into the process, and leads to brainstorming solutions. So as Dean of Academic Counseling and Student Success, onboarding is a huge aspect of my work. For example, to engage high school students, we have them complete an online orientation, then they come on campus for a 5-hour immersive experience to develop their educational plan, register for classes, and check in with financial aid. It's phenomenal... AND what was most eye-opening for me is we haven't really assessed the experience from the student perspective. We might be able to make it better. We might not need the full 5 hours. It might be very difficult for someone to get on campus but they still need all that same information. How are we engaging other students populations joining our campus beyond high schoolers? And we can do that for anything - setting up discussion boards in canvas, writing a syllabus, etc.



Watch the CCC systemwide webinar on UDL or read the webinar summary.

What are the next steps for the UDL Taskforce?

If we're going to do this and do it well, we have to integrate it with the other initiatives so it doesn't feel like just another thing. It may sound disconnected but it's not. We've found a way to integrate equity into all aspects of our work, same with UDL. Our system is in need of UDL. We have these recommendations, and now implementation needs to be fleshed out. We want to think about how we can incentivize it... can we identify faculty champions, can we allocate funding? These pieces will build momentum and create opportunities for folks to come up and lead. There is more to come.

California Master Plan For Developmental Services

What is the Master Plan?

In March 2025, the state of California released the Master Plan for Developmental Services (MPDS), a 10-year vision to strengthen how the state supports people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their families. The plan was developed over the course of a year (April 2024-March 2025) through monthly meetings across the state, which brought together a diverse group of stakeholders. The process centered lived experience, with self-advocates not only sharing feedback but shaping recommendations. The MPDS lays out six key goals: 1) systems centered in equity, 2) people with I/DD making their own life choices, 3) access to services people want and need, 4) a strong and supported workforce, 5) transparency and accountability, and 6) guiding the future of developmental services.



Why does it matter?

California's developmental services system impacts several aspects of life, including healthcare, housing, employment, and education. Yet many people with I/DD still experience fragmented services and inaccessible supports. The MPDS is an ambitious response to these long-standing gaps.

The Impact on Colleges and Postsecondary Education

The MPDS identifies inclusive, high-quality education as a cornerstone of equity (see page 50 in the MPDS). Yet, many students with I/DD face educational barriers, especially as they transition to adulthood. The plan outlines recommendations for K-12 and higher education:

- Designing educational systems using Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
- Supporting student-led Individualized Education Plans (IEP) and flexible pathways to college or careers
- Training educators and other professionals to support students with I/DD
- Tracking graduation and transition outcomes, especially in postsecondary education
- Expanding partnerships between the Department of Developmental Services, the Department of Rehabilitation, and institutions like the California Community Colleges, California State Universities, the University of California system, and trade schools to increase access and supports for students with I/DD

>>> Learn more at the California Health and Human Services MPDS page

Resource Spotlight: Think College

In their own words, "Think College is a national technical assistance, research, and evaluation center dedicated to developing, expanding, and improving higher education options for students with intellectual disability." They have a wealth of resources, including:

1. A library of recorded webinars on topics relevant to students with intellectual disability (ID), such as navigating family involvement for students with ID and a training series for peer mentors. Think College Online Courses offer a comprehensive look at specific topics, like accreditation standards for postsecondary education programs for students with ID.

2. Over 1000 resources for postsecondary educators, including fact sheets, publications, and tools used by other campuses across the country. There are many program development resources for colleges considering creating a dedicated program or expanding existing supports for students with ID.

3. A nationwide college search for families and professionals to find different programs serving students with ID and public awareness campaign materials readily accessible to all for use in motivating change toward inclusive college for all.

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Read past issues of the ACCESS Newsletter