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Unwanted Sexual Contact: Students With Autism and Other Disabilities at Greater Risk

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Ten percent of college students identify as having a disability (Snyder & Dillow, 2011), and a subsample of this population, students with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), are increasingly participating in higher education (Geller & Greenberg, 2010). Disability resource offices at doctoral-granting institutions serve an average of 8.6 students with ASD per semester (Kasnitz, 2011), whereas these offices at 2-year colleges serve an average of 16.4 students with ASD per semester (Brown & Coomes, 2015). Furthermore, the participation of students with ASD in postsecondary education is expected to increase as one in 68 individuals is diagnosed with ASD (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).

Autism spectrum disorders represent a spectrum of neurodevelopmental differences that can contribute to difficulties in communication and social interactions. In their research on the experiences of college students with ASD, Van Hees, Moyson, and Roeyers (2015) found "challenges frequently reported include nonacademic issues such as difficulties with social skills, interpersonal deficits, organizational and time management difficulties, lacking self-advocacy skills and sensory overload, as well as problems meeting academic demands" (p. 1674). The small but growing body of literature regarding experiences of college students with ASD indicates that students face an unwelcoming campus environment (Brown, Peña, & Rankin, 2015; Van Hees et al., 2015) and experience prejudice (Wiorkowski, 2015). Brown et al. (2015) found that 33% of students with ASD experienced exclusionary behavior and only 67% felt comfortable in their classrooms. Additionally, functional limitations in areas of communication and social-emotional interactions make it difficult for students with ASD to navigate relationships (Van Hees et al., 2015). Challenges in discerning when others are being deceptive or have malicious intent (Dennis, Lockyer, & Lazenby, 2000) place students with ASD at risk for predatory behavior (Edelson, 2010; Sevlever, Roth, & Gillis, 2013).

Very little literature about sexual harassment, unwanted sexual contact, or assault of children with ASD exists (Mandell, Walrath, Manteuffel, Sgro, & Pinto-Martin, 2005). The broader literature indicates that college students with disabilities experience "higher rates of victimization" (Cantor et al., 2015, p. 36); however, there is no existing literature that examines unwanted sexual contact or sexual assault for college students with ASD.

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Rather than focusing on prevalence, the existing literature on sexual assault and ASD describes risk factors (e.g., Edelson, 2010) including a lack of sexual knowledge (e.g., Brown-Lavoie, Viecili, & Weiss, 2014); the mistaken belief that individuals with ASD are asexual (Irvine, 2005); and challenges to providing sex education for children, adolescents, and adults with ASD in community settings (e.g., Koller, 2000). Brown-Lavoie et al. (2014) found a relationship between lack of actual sexual knowledge and increased risk of victimization and explained that decreased social interactions and increased social isolation among students with ASD prevent these students from receiving sexual knowledge from peers, parents, and teachers that can mediate the risk for victimization. Edelson (2010) proposed that females with ASD might be at greater risk for sexual abuse and noted this was an area for future research.

Without a better understanding of unwanted sexual contact, student affairs practitioners and scholars have little knowledge to draw on when supporting the growing number of college students with ASD and other disabilities. To address the paucity of literature, we used data from a multi-institution climate assessment to examine the following research question: What is the prevalence of unwanted sexual contact for college students who self-identify as a person with ASD and two comparison groups: college students with other types of disabilities and students without disabilities?

METHODS

Nine campuses were involved in this study, and university community members completed 104,208 surveys for an overall response rate of 27%. The undergraduate student response rate, which was the sample used for this study, was 21% (n = 37,693). All campuses were public, 4-year institutions. Seven percent of participants (n = 2,735) did not provide a disability status, leaving blank all responses to the question including "I have none of the listed conditions." Disability was the focal point, and participants with missing disability data were removed from the analysis. Similarly, 79 participants did not respond to the survey question regarding unwanted sexual contact, and we excluded them from the analysis. The final sample included 34,879 students (92.5% of the original undergraduate sample).

Of the students in this study, there were 0.45% (n = 158) with ASD, 20.12% (n = 7,018) with disabilities other than ASD, and 79.43% (n = 27,703) without disabilities. Students with ASD were more likely to have parents who had attended college; only 24.4% (n = 31) of students with ASD were first generation. In comparison, 37.1% (n = 2,605) of students with non-ASD disabilities and 36.8% (n = 10,179) of students without disabilities identified as first generation. The sample was racially diverse: 39.2% (n = 62) of students with ASD identified as White and 24.1% (n = 38) of students with ASD identified as Asian / Asian American. In comparison, for students with non-ASD disabilities, 31.0% (n = 2,184) identified as White and 32.3% (n = 2,266) identified as Asian / Asian American. The majority (62.0%, n = 98) of students with ASD identified as heterosexual, whereas 18.4% (n = 29) identified as LGBQ and 19.0% (n = 30) identified as other. Of the students with ASD 59.0% (n = 93) identified as men, 27.8% (n = 44) as women, 3.8% (n = 6) as gender queer, and 1.3% (n = 2) as transgendered, and 8.2% (n = 13) reported multiple or other gender identities. Hence, students with ASD may hold multiple identities that are often invisible and frequently marginalized.

Instrument

The data used in this project came from a campus climate assessment conducted in a state's college/university system in 2012. The survey questions utilized in this assessment were constructed based on the work of Rankin (2003) and asked respondents a wide range of questions about their personal campus experiences, their perceptions of the campus climate, and their perceptions of institutional actions, including administrative policies and academic initiatives. The survey was available in both online and pencil-and-paper formats. The survey was offered in English, Spanish, and Mandarin. The university's Institutional Review Board directors reviewed the project, including the survey instrument.

All responses were entered into a secure site's database, stripped of their IP addresses, and then tabulated for appropriate analysis. Only surveys that were at least 50% completed were included in the final dataset. The survey question used to create the dependent variable asked: "Within the last 5 years, have you experienced unwanted physical sexual contact at [name of campus]?" This question was close-ended with two response possibilities (yes/no). The definition of *unwanted physical sexual contact* provided at the start of the survey included forcible fondling, sexual assault, forcible rape, use of drugs to incapacitate, forcible sodomy, gang rape, and sexual assault with an object.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including chi-square tests and measures of effect size, were employed in the analyses. Both the independent and dependent measures were categorical, and the research question indicated a test for significant association between the variables, so a Pearson chi-square test for independence and Cramér's V (effect size) were utilized. Gravetter and Wallnau's (2012) formula was used for calculating effect size for a 3 × 2 table, where a small effect size is .01, a medium effect size is .30, and a large effect size is .50.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, there was a significant association between disability status and students' experience of unwanted sexual contact, $\chi^2(2, n = 34{,}879) = 231.80$, $p < .001$, $V = .08$. Both students with ASD (8.2%, $n = 13$) and students with non-ASD disabilities (9.3%, $n = 651$) reported higher rates of unwanted sexual contact than did their peers without disabilities (4.6%, $n = 1{,}282$). Although the

TABLE 1.
Chi-Square Test for Independence: Experience of Unwanted Sexual Contact (N = 34,879)

	Yes		No			
Disability Status	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**χ^2**	***df***
ASD[a]	8.2	13	91.0	145	231.80**	2
Disability Not ASD	9.3	651	90.7	6,367		
No Disability	4.6	1,282	95.4	26,421		
Total	5.6	1,946	94.4	32,933		

[a] ASD = autism spectrum disorder.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2.
Gender Difference in Unwanted Sexual Contact by Disability Status (N = 1,944)[a]

	Men		Women		Nonbinary	
Disability Status	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***
ASD[b]	15.4	2	61.5	8	23.1	3
Disability Not ASD	17.1	11	75.4	491	7.5	49
No Disability	14.4	185	83.2	1,066	2.2	29
Total	15.3	298	80.5	1,565	4.2	81

[a] 2 respondents did not indicate gender identity and were excluded from this analysis.

[b] ASD = autism spectrum disorder.

effect size of .08 suggests a small association, it is meaningful that students with non-ASD disabilities and students with ASD were twice as likely as their peers to report unwanted sexual contact . Results indicate that, regardless of socioemotional functional limitations, students with disabilities are at greater risk.

There are notable differences in the gender identity of students who reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact (see Table 2). Although only 27.8% of students with ASD identified as women, this population made up the majority (61.5%) of students who reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact. In contrast, 59.0% of respondents with ASD identified as men and 15.4% (n = 2) experienced unwanted sexual contact. Furthermore, in comparison to their peers without disabilities, students with ASD who held nonbinary gender identities (gender queer, transgender, other, or multiple) reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact at a disproportionately higher rate (23.1%, n = 3).

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that college students with ASD and their peers with disabilities are more likely to experience unwanted sexual contact when compared to students without disabilities. These results parallel finding of Cantor et al. (2015) that women undergraduates with a disability experienced higher rates of nonconsensual sexual contact. Our findings expand on the work of Stevens (2012), who reported that sexual victimization disproportionately affects women with developmental disabilities. Specifically, our findings indicate that both students with ASD who identify as women and those who hold nonbinary gender identities have a proportionately greater risk of experiencing unwanted sexual contact than do their male counterparts with ASD.

The research previously reviewed reflected that adults with ASD might be at increased risk for sexual victimization due to their limited sexual knowledge and experiences as well as challenges in social situations. Irvine (2005) found that sex education was an important method of preventing sexual abuse for children with ASD and noted that, frequently, parents or teachers do not communicate this information. Student affairs scholars and practitioners should develop inclusive sexual education programs as students transition into college to promote healthy interactions and prevent instances of unwanted sexual harassment, advances, or assault for all students. Specific programs should be included for students identifying with ASD, particularly during orientation, transfer, or other kinds of transition programs. Principles of universal

design should be applied to the content and delivery of this information so that programs are accessible to all students with disabilities and meet the neuro-diverse learning of students with ASD. For instance, programming should be highly structured, contain concrete examples, and break information down into manageable segments (Austin & Peña, 2017). Educators must also attend to the emotional climate by identifying behaviors that reflect heightened anxiety and encouraging students with ASD to take breaks when needed (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). Individuals who develop sexual assault prevention programming are encouraged to keep in mind gender-specific needs and experiences (Stevens, 2012) when serving this highly vulnerable population.

Readers should consider limitations and implications for future research when interpreting these findings. Sexual assault is viewed as a private topic that is frequently associated with shame, guilt, embarrassment, or anger; therefore, victims may be unwilling to disclose (Sable, Danis, Mauzy, & Gallagher, 2006). The findings presented here are indicative of the experience of students only at 4-year, public institutions in one state, and future research should include a wider range of institutions (e.g., 2-year colleges). Also, this survey did not ask about nonphysical sexual harassment, and thus, findings may underreport the broader hostile sexual environment. Future studies should examine the experiences of unwanted sexual harassment and victimization among students with ASD, especially women or students with nonbinary gender identities, in more depth. Understanding the catalysts for these situations can inform administrators, faculty, and peers to prevent and address them.

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