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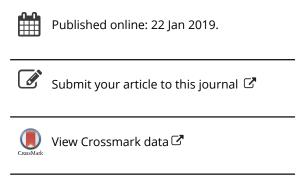
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Omission and Othering: Constructing Autism on Community College Websites

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ABSTRACT

Students with autism attend two-year colleges at a significantly greater rate than four-year institutions. As these prospective and current students engage with two-year colleges, websites are an important digital platform to assess inclusivity and campus climate. The digital environment is particularly important because many autistic individuals prefer to engage in written communication. We employed a critical content analysis to understand the digital campus climate at public two-year colleges ($n = 94$) by analyzing website content that colleges use to describe autism. Findings show that the digital campus climate was unwelcoming for the vast majority of prospective and current students with autism. Autism was omitted from 29.8% of institutional websites. Colleges located in the eastern or western areas of the United States had lower rates of omission. When references to autism were present, website content used medical and legal language to depict autistic students as deficient. Institutional websites othered students by objectifying autism and using volunteer or charity work to frame autism as outside of normalcy. Text written by autistic people (students, alumni, staff, or organizations) was absent from all but one institutions' website. Implications for practitioners include addressing institutionalized ableism by modifying websites to include autism-specific content, removing deficit narratives, and amplifying autistic agency by including material written by autistic individuals.

One in 68 children is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (autism; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). For individuals with autism, attending college is an important avenue to develop independent living skills, explore academic interests, and attain employment goals (Wei, Wagner, Hudson, Yu, & Shattuck, 2015). Six years following graduation, 46.6% of high school autistic students who received special education services enrolled in college and these students are twice as likely to attend two-year institutions (32.6%) than four-year institutions (15.7%; Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). Yet, comparatively few studies focus on two-year colleges (for exception, see Brown & Coomes, 2016). Much of the existent research on autism examines interventions designed to support the individual student via transition planning and accommodations (Brown, 2017) or classroom interventions and faculty training (Austin & Peña, 2017). Yet the environment plays a critical role for scholars and practitioners seeking to understand behavior (Lewin, 1999), development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), and college student departure (Tinto, 1993). There is a lack of research that examines postsecondary institutional environments and autistic students.

Institutional environments are traditionally thought of as classrooms, residence halls, or community spaces that foster meaningful intellectual discussions and relationships. However, higher education also exists in a highly complex digital world. The digital environment, which encompasses

websites and social media platforms, is an important metric of campus climate (Taylor, Dockendorff, & Inselman, 2017). Rankin and Reason (2008) defined campus climate as "the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential" (p. 264). Campus climate shapes the extent to which students feel socially accepted and develop a sense of belonging, both of which influence students' likelihood to persist and graduate (Leake & Stodden, 2014).

Websites are useful mechanisms for "recruiting, building relationships, and maintaining an appropriate flow of information" (Shadinger, 2013, p. 927). They also function as enrollment and admissions tools (Erickson et al., 2013) and a space for engaging in a dialogue with students (Shadinger, 2013). In their work on student engagement, Korbel, McGuire, Banerjee, and Saunders (2011) noted comfortable campus climate is "communicated most powerfully through less obvious means, such as who is pictured on the institution's Web site" (p. 41). Prior research indicates that the digital environment is a metric that minoritized students can use to assess campus climate (Taylor et al., 2017). Within disability literature, however, the focus centers on legal compliance with web accessibility standards. Thus, the digital environment is left unnoticed. For example, digital campus climate is not addressed in a research brief on campus climate produced by the National Center for College Students with Disabilities (Harbour & Greenberg, 2017) or in a recent book chapter that used Student Experience in the Research University survey data to describe the campus climate for students with disabilities at large public institutions (Zehner, 2018).

Digital campus climate is significant; the messages that institutions communicate about autism can cultivate inclusion and value diversity, or reinforce normalcy and reproduce oppression (Murray, 2008; Osteen, 2008). The digital environment is particularly important for autistic students, who may prefer to engage in written and online communication (Davidson & Henderson, 2010) due to the functional limitations associated with autism (e.g., difficulties interpreting in-person non-verbal communication). Therefore, the purpose of this research is to understand the digital campus climate via messages that prospective or current students receive by analyzing the website content that colleges use to describe autism.

Relevant literature

We recognize that the medical paradigm creates a dominant discourse. Thus, we began the literature review by describing varying perspectives on autism. Next, we examined research about autistic students in postsecondary education and in critical disability studies to understand how institutions shape the autistic collegiate experience. Additionally, we employed a fourth body of literature, research on community college websites, to map how students operate in digital spaces.

Varying perspectives on autism

Socio-historically there are a variety of perspectives on autism (see Silberman, 2015 for a detailed description). Autism is often portrayed in a deficit-based light; in the medical paradigm, individuals have difficulty with communication, socialization, sensory sensitivity, and restricted interests or activities (Heflin & Alaimo, 2007), and lack self-advocacy skills (Hurewitz & Berger, 2008). In contrast, others, particularly disabled people, view autism as a valuable part of an individual's identity with unique assets, such as hypersensitivity and hyperfocus (Fein, 2015). The concept of neurodiversity positions autism as a facet of social diversity and recognizes the "important strengths, talents, abilities, and gifts" of autistic people (Robertson & Ne'eman, 2008, p. 16).

Autistic experiences in postsecondary education

College access is important for individuals with autism – college attendance provides intellectual, emotional, and social benefits, ranging from opportunities to develop critical thinking skills to

participating in age-appropriate educational settings (Wiorkowski, 2015). Long-term benefits of postsecondary education include greater earning potential and access to a wider range of career possibilities. Increased career options are vital; in comparison with non-disabled counterparts, people with disabilities have significantly lower rates of employment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

A growing body of literature examines the experiences of autistic college students (e.g., Cox et al., 2017). Campus climate, social connection, and belongingness are key factors in the quality of students' experiences (Brown, Peña, & Rankin, 2015). Autistic students described enjoying social interactions, but also feel let down by these interactions and experience prejudice (Wiorkowski, 2015). Students identified ignorance, generalizations about autism, unsupportive policies, and the desire to "make a fresh start" as barriers to their self-disclosure (Van Hees, Moyson, & Roeyers, 2015, p. 1680). Students' concerns about disclosure are valid; faculty reported that they are underprepared to serve autistic students (McKeon, Alpern, & Zager, 2013) and faculty believed that including autistic students in their courses would disturb class routines and take more time (Gibbons, Cihak, Mynatt, & Wilhoit, 2015).

Autistic students may find attending two-year colleges to be appealing for several reasons, including avoiding entrance interviews (Kelty, 2015), enrolling in smaller classes (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014), living at home with their parents (Wei et al., 2014), and paying lower tuition (Cohen et al., 2014). Although two-year colleges serve a greater number of autistic students, there are no differences between two-year and four-year institutions in the types of accommodations or level of support services (Brown, 2017). Forty-three percent of self-disclosing autistic students who attended two-year colleges graduated within eight years of being out of high school (Snyder et al., 2016).

Autistic students use digital methods of communication to access admissions, transition, and disability accommodation materials. Roux et al. (2015) found that, for autistic students enrolled in two-year colleges, 68.5% were from households with incomes over $50,000, and 92.7% had at least one parent who attended college, making socio-economic access to digital platforms a greater possibility. Federal mandates associated with the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA, 2008) make it reasonable to assume that websites play a part in communicating accommodations policies and information.

Critical disability studies

Critical analyses by disability studies scholars emphasized socio-political contexts (Osteen, 2008) and representation (Murray, 2008) as ways to understand the connection between institutional context and the lived experiences of disabled people. Lester, Dostal, and Gabriel (2013) employed the lens of power to analyze language that colleges used to describe accommodations for students with disabilities. They found institutions employed the concepts of academic integrity, reasonable accommodations, and documentation to position the university "as the authority on both the presence of a disability and the institutional response to disability" (p. 56). Further, colleges utilized legal language to produce and reinforce their control over disabled students (Lester et al., 2013).

We were unable to locate previous research about autism content analysis within education (K-12 or postsecondary) and extended our review to broader contexts. Power embedded in discourse unfolds when the contributions of non-powerful participants are controlled by powerful participants (Fairclough, 1989). Autism is particularly vulnerable to colonization and misrepresentation because people with neurological and cognitive impairments may not communicate well enough to self-advocate or are not given the opportunity to use their preferred mode of communication (E. Peña, personal communication, June 3, 2017). Hence, non-autistic people have historically represented autism (Osteen, 2008).

Disabled people are *othered* – a process of objectifying, excluding, or alienating someone by presenting them as outside of normalcy (Petersen, 2011). Othering can occur when disability is depicted as objects of pity or charity cases. Hayes and Black (2003) explained pity is "an emotionally conditioned social response which marginalizes those with disabilities and better serves the interests

of those who show pity than it does the object of their pity" (para. 6). McGuire (2013) examined the construction of autism in corporate advocacy campaigns, finding autism was infantilized, "streamlined, simplified, fetishized" (p. 105).

There are stark differences between the writings of autistic authors and mainstream cultural productions. Dominant representations of autism are replete with deficit-based stereotypes, fictional accounts that sketch images of social or linguistic incompetence (Davidson & Henderson, 2010), and a false dichotomy between high and low functioning (Schwarz, 2008). Schwarz explained that neurotypical people do not see "desirable aspects to autism that we would not want to live without" (p. 257). Parsloe's (2015) discourse analysis of an online community described how autistic individuals used digital spaces to reclaim autistic identity by shifting their understanding from a medical to cultural perspective. Parsloe found that autistic people reclaimed ideas of normalcy and symptoms. Therefore, consideration of authorship and agency is imperative within a critical autistic analysis.

Community college websites

Students' exposure to colleges often begins through visiting their websites. Prospective and recently enrolled students rely on utilizing institutional websites more than any other informational method to learn about a college (Fishman & Love, 2015). The messages that websites communicate are important because images and text "provide many prospective students with their first and only institutional impressions" (Saichaie & Morphew, 2014, p. 500). Existing content analyses of college websites are limited by sampling techniques situated primarily at four-year institutions (Saichaie & Morphew, 2014).

Previous research on community college websites and content about minoritized populations demonstrated that websites are an avenue to assess digital campus climate. In their examination of LGBTQ+ website content, Taylor et al. (2017) found geographic variations in inclusivity. Taylor et al. demonstrated how a focus on legally required statements combined with an absence of website information on programming may cause students who identify with minoritized populations to not see themselves as represented within the campus community.

Existing research regarding disability and community college websites focuses on usability and accessibility rather than content (e.g., Bray & Sweatt, 2018). Poor website design is a problem: 77.0% of students with disabilities indicated they experienced difficulty locating essential material (Erickson et al., 2013). Legal mandates (e.g., Section 508 and the Office of Civil Rights) have clearly established the significance of website accessibility (Evans, Broido, Brown, & Wilke, 2017). We were unable to locate studies that analyzed the content of community college websites for students with disabilities.

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks

Multiple frameworks shape and inform constructs of disability. We briefly acknowledge medical and legal models because they are common within higher education; we employ socially just and critical lenses to examine oppression, hegemony, ableism, and power.

Since the 1800s, the medical model has been a major paradigm for understanding disability; in many cases, the medical lens is culturally embedded and thus shapes definitions of disability without a conscious awareness (Evans et al., 2017). Under this model, disability is viewed as a medical problem, a defect or deficit that requires help or support. The medical model is problematic because it ignores environmental, cultural, and political factors, and naturalizes the concept of disability as a deficiency. Thus, autistic students are viewed as incompetent in their ability to communicate and socialize.

As an outgrowth of the medical model, the legal model views disability within the political context of federal and state laws. Autistic students must meet standards of measurable deficiency under the ADAAA (2008) to access accommodations. The legal model is problematic because the law acts as a normalizing agent; legal rights do not always address oppression or ameliorate inequality (Spade, 2011). In this model, documentation, accommodation, and litigation shape autism.

In contrast to medical and legal frameworks, theories of social justice focus on oppression and the hierarchical distribution of power by social group membership (Bell, 2007). Ableism is oppression related to disability that pervasively and systematically excludes, restricts, or discriminates against people with disabilities and privileges non-disabled individuals. Part of the power of abelism is that it equates able-bodiedness with normalcy. Ableism operates on the individual, institutional, and societal levels (Evans et al., 2017); two-year colleges represent social structures for scholars to explore the production and reproduction of power.

Within critical theory, hegemony explains how power is maintained. Although hegemony exercises power via force or coercion, this also occurs through "the manufacture of *consent*" and "acquiescence" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 4). Hegemony provides a window to see how power operates when well-meaning people do not question everyday practices (Bell, 2007). Further, hegemony is "maintained through 'discourse,' which includes ideas, texts, theories, and language" (Bell, 2007, p. 11). In relation to disability, concepts of normalcy and othering – framing students with disabilities as outside of normal – are hegemonic methods that exclude and objectify (Petersen, 2011).

Methodology and methods

Content analysis is a research technique focused on describing, interpreting, and analyzing written or visual artifacts (Krippendorff, 2013). Researchers use content analysis as a methodological tool to understand "what a text is about" (Beach et al., 2009, p. 130). Krippendorff (2013) defined text as being "produced by someone to have meanings for someone else" (p. 25) and posited that "texts acquire significance … in the contexts of their use" (p. 38).

Several categories of content analyses exist; following Krippendorff (2013), we focused on institutional processes. Studying institutional content allows for exploration into the ways members' routine aspects of organizing (e.g., documents) are everyday processes that illuminate institutions. When interpreting institution-level phenomena, Krippendorff posited researchers should pay attention to habitualization – a method by which choices are narrowed because actions are repeated to create unnoticed behavioral patterns. For example, patterns of the language used to describe disability shape our thoughts so that we recognize only two options, disabled and abled (Krippendorff, 2013). Habitualization limits the ability to consider alternatives – disability is fluid, changes over the life course, or is created by environmental barriers.

Critical analysis

"What makes a study 'critical' is not the methodology but the framework used to think within, through, and beyond the text" (Beach et al., 2009, p. 130). A critical focus examines how language is significant to "production, maintenance, and change of social relations of power" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 1). We concentrated on how language is used by one dominant social group over another (Fairclough, 1989) by employing a theoretical platform that centers ableism. Following Lester et al. (2013), we assume that ideas of normal and abnormal are constructed; thus, we considered the ways in which website content represented autism by positioning certain identities, actions, and behaviors as being desirable or normal. Further, Osteen (2008) noted discourses about autism are also a venue to examine power structures by asking "who speaks?" (p. 6); non-autistic people are the primary authors of higher education research (see Wiorkowski [2015] as exception) and creators of campus discourse. Although ableism is everyone's responsibility, disability research has a long history of colonization, particularly under the guise of medical authority (Evans et al., 2017); thus, power dynamics must be closely scrutinized in all elements of life and, for the purposes of our study, on websites.

Research questions

Following Krippendorff's conceptualization of content analysis – as a tool to question the dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative spheres – we employed a mixed-methods approach. The purpose of this study is to quantify the prevalence of autism discourse and to make meaning of texts relative to agency and digital campus climate. We specifically focused on institutional websites because they are spaces of power; official communications (e.g., student handbook) are found within these digital landscapes. Four research questions shaped this study:

(1) How do academic institutions, via their websites, depict and define autistic students?
(2) To what degree is autistic agency included in the institutional discourse about autism?
(3) Are there trends in website content based on Carnegie institutional characteristics?
(4) What factors predict if institutions will have autism-related content on their website?

Sample

We selected public two-year college websites as the object of analysis because these spaces are avenues of information for parents and current or prospective students. By employing institutions as objects of analysis we focused on the environment, rather than individual students. We used the *Carnegie Classifications Data File* (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2015) and excluded all institutions that were not sector 4 (public two-year); the sample frame had 928 institutions. A random sample of ~10% (*n* = 94) was drawn (see Table 1).

Data collection and analysis

We employed both deductive and inductive approaches to data analysis. We started by reading disability studies literature and generating a list of key ideas, phrases, or concepts. Then, we created a coding instrument to guide our manual searches of websites by merging key categories with Carnegie variables. This document summary form was a data organization tool. We employed manual internet searches to: identify if an institution's website possessed autism information; determine the number of unique references for the search terms "Autism," "ASD," and "Asperger" on each website; and calculate the number of references for a comparison term, "disability." We visited each page and tracked whether or not the specific search term appeared. In several cases, the search indicated a keyword, but there was no autism-related content. We labeled these instances as "false hits" and tracked their prevalence.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample.

Institution Program Classification	*n* (% of sample)
Mission	
Minority-serving	37 (39.4%)
Majority-serving	57 (60.6%)
Size	
Very large	11 (11.7%)
Large	12 (12.8%)
Medium	30 (31.9%)
Small	39 (41.5%)
Very small	2 (2.1%)
Region	
East	11 (11.7%)
Midwest	23 (24.5%)
South	36 (38.3%)
West	24 (25.5%)
Degree of urbanization	
City	25 (26.6%)
Suburban	21 (22.3%)
Town	25 (26.6%)
Rural	23 (23.5%)

We created a separate document for each institution to store screenshots of website content and a detailed analysis of text tone, content, and representation. We imported the coding instrument and institution-specific Word documents into Excel and Dedoose to facilitate the examination of themes. Then, we employed an inductive process to identify themes that emerged across two-year institutions. We focused on four Carnegie characteristics for data coding (minority-serving, size, locale, and region). We selected these specific variables because existing research showed regional and demographic differences in rates of autism diagnoses (Hoffman et al., 2017) and access to treatment (Mire, Hughes, Manis, & Goin-Kochel, 2018). We also theorized that minority-serving institutions may demonstrate greater awareness of diversity and feature more inclusive language.

During this process, we engaged in reflective journaling and in particular considered our positionality as autistic and learning disabled researchers with higher education experience via doctoral programs and employment. We discussed connections between this work and our lived experiences. Like the vast majority of students with disabilities (Evans et al., 2017), we are researchers who started our academic careers by attending two-year colleges.

Limitations

Similar to other content analyses of digital spaces (e.g., Taylor et al., 2017), we analyzed material on institutional websites and excluded other venues, such as social media platforms. This research was dependent on existing search tools; for example, website usability could have compromised findings. Websites have multiple authors and thus might present inconsistent narratives in different spaces. Data only represent a snapshot of how websites appeared over a six-month period (January 2017–July 2017).

Findings

Text found on two-year college websites was replete with ableism. We summarize our findings in Table 2 and expand on their meanings below.

Depictions and definitions

The omission of autism was prevalent; 29.8% of institutions (n = 28) lacked references to key search terms. Autism text was absent from disability-specific digital spaces (e.g., Disability Service Office [DSO] webpages) and other prominent institutional webpages (e.g., diversity programming). The omission of content demonstrates that institutions fail to prioritize autism. Further, over one-third (36.4%; n = 24) of the websites with autism content (n = 66) had false hits. False hits may feel

Table 2. Summary of Findings.

Research Questions and Themes
Depiction and definition
Omission of autism content
Naturalized medical and legal ideologies
Defined autism as disability instead of diversity
Autistic agency
Absence of material produced by autistic individuals
Othering
Institutional characteristics
Equal omission for majority and minority serving
Majority-serving used more medical/legal language
Medium-size colleges emphasized inclusion
City and suburban have greater focus on programing
Town and rural have greater focus on charity
East and West regions have lower omission
Predictive factors
Annual median household income

misleading to students or parents who are seeking resources; within the initial search, it appears that the institution offers information but clicking on specific links takes the user to webpages with no autism content.

When institutions had at least one reference to autism, the amount of general disability content overshadowed the amount of autism text. Combined references for autism search terms elicited an average of 13.7 links per institution; the median was four and the range was 0–151. References for the search term *disability* averaged 1,003.7 links per institution, with a median of 413.

All institutions dichotomize students as abled or disabled and placed autistic students in the disabled category. Website text did not describe autism as a component of diversity or part of human variation. Instead, autism was depicted using medical language, particularly on DSO intake forms or in relation to accommodations. Institutions referenced diagnosis and relegated authority to medical providers rather than positioning students as sources of authority in their own lives. San Diego City College's website stated: "Disability verification documentation must be within the last three years … The documentation must be signed by a licensed health care professional" (n.d., para. 1).

Institutions employed legal language to frame autism. Pratt Community College's (2016-2017) student handbook stated Pratt, "complies with both the letter and spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act and is committed to providing … access to education where this will not pose an undue burden or fundamentally alter the programs" (p. 71). Website content comprised of college policies that cited federal law as the basis for behaviors that students must abide by in order to obtain accommodations. For example, "Parkland College Eligibility Policies and Procedures comply with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Documents providing evidence of disability must be presented to the Office of Disability Services" (Parkland College, n.d., para 1). Standardized institutional protocols required autistic students to disclose in order to access accommodations. Institutions used legal language to depict autism as requiring documentation, registration, and disclosure.

Institutions framed autism from a deficit paradigm. For instance, Modesto Junior College's (n.d.) disability intake form described autism as a neurodevelopmental disorder where symptoms are "present in the early developmental period, and cause limitations in social, academic, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning" (p. 6). Deficit-based descriptions occurred in text materials beyond the DSO. Solano Community College's (2013) faculty newsletter stated:

> We are seeing an increased number of students on the Autism spectrum who may demonstrate mind blindness, social awkwardness or difficulty reading social cues and have difficulty discerning appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Regardless, of the student's possible disability or not, this is definitely a behavioral issue in the classroom and needs to be addressed as one. (p. 1)

Curricular content was also limitations-driven; a human development class at Linn-Benton Community College (n.d.) described autism as "believed to involve some sort of brain dysfunction" (para. 3). Several institutional websites marketed continuing education courses that described autistic students in relation to negative classroom behaviors.

Autistic agency and othering

Autistic agency is when students on the spectrum define their own lived experiences (Parsloe, 2015). However, our findings indicate that non-autistic participants constrained and controlled the contributions of autistic students, faculty, staff, alumni, societies, or professional organizations. Only one institution featured content explicitly authored by autistic individuals, in the form of links to publications on the college experience by *Autism NOW* (Northern Virginia Community College, n.d.).

Website content constructed autistic people as *others* in need of help or assistance by describing charity events or volunteer service organized by non-autistic students, faculty, and staff. For example, Lakes Region Community College (n.d.) held a "Flap-Jack" Fundraiser where neurotypical students served pancakes to raise money for a local autism center. Volunteer service involved

participation in autism walks or mentoring at a local autism organization. Autism was also framed as an object of pity via autism awareness events (e.g., Temple Grandin Day; Jackson State Community College, n.d.). In one instance, autism was the speech platform for a non-autistic student partaking in a beauty pageant (Carl Albert State College, n.d.). The text surrounding awareness events framed autism as a deficit; autism was objectified as something to talk "about." Autistic people needed things "done for them," rather than "with them."

Institutional characteristics

We examined the ways in which themes identified above varied across four Carnegie characteristics. One-third of both minority-serving and majority-serving institutions did not have autism content on their websites. Majority-serving institutions utilized medical and legal language more frequently.

Institutions with larger enrollment had lower rates of omission; 90.9% of very large and 91.7% of large colleges had autism text, whereas 80.0% of medium and 66.7% of small colleges had text. The presence of autism content does not speak to the tone, depth of information, or usefulness of this text. Medium-size college websites had greater emphasis on inclusive language and provided a range of resources (e.g., faculty education). For instance, Holyoke Community College (n.d.) offered a "Students on the Autism Spectrum Club" that "welcome(s) anyone to join," "seeks to educate the HCC community about autism, the spectrum, and the life of people living with a diagnosis," and stages a yearly educational panel featuring autistic students (p. 1).

Institutions in higher population areas (e.g., 72.0% of city, 90.0% of suburban) possessed lower rates of omission than institutions in lower population areas (56.0% of town, 60.9% of rural). The focus of website content also shifted by degree of urbanization, as institutions in more populated areas (city and suburban) had greater emphasis on autism programming, whereas less populated areas (town and rural) had more text about charity. For example, Texas State Technical College, West Texas, listed a press release describing a sign created by welding students for the Waco Autism Center (Perry, 2017). The prevalence of legal and medical content was a consistent theme across degree of institutional urbanization.

Finally, we explored themes based on geographic region. Institutions located in the East (90.9%) and West (87.6%) had more autism content, whereas only 55.6% of colleges in the South region had autism content.

Predictive modeling

We hypothesized that institutions with greater fiscal resources would be more likely to have autism-related content. To explore this relationship, we created a database of median annual household income by institutional zip code (proxy for fiscal resources) using data from the United States Census Bureau. Descriptive analysis indicated a positive skew for the number of webpages with autism content (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality: .26; $df = 93$). Thus we employed Spearman's rho as a non-parametric correlation because the distribution was not normal. There was a small, positive correlation between the two variables ($r = .26$, $n = 93$, $p = .01$); greater household income was associated with more webpages with autism content.

Based on epidemiological data regarding autism diagnosis rates (Hoffman et al., 2017), we hypothesized that institutions located in the Eastern and Western regions, minority-serving, and institutions with larger enrollment size would be more likely to have autism-related content on their websites. Logistic regression modeling indicated that median annual household income was a significant predictor, $p < .01$ and correctly classified 72.0% of the cases; χ^2 (1, $N = 9$) = 10.26, Nagelkerke R squared 14.8%. However, models that incorporated geographic location, level of urbanization, minority-serving, and institution size were not significant predictors of whether or not an institution had autism content.

Discussion

We confirm existent literature on digital campus climate for students with marginalized social locations. Akin to Taylor et al. (2017), our findings demonstrate how institutions create chilly digital campus climates. Similarly, we corroborate the work of Lester et al. (2013); institutions employed legal discourse as a means of controlling autistic students via the process used to access accommodations. We support the wealth of disabilities studies literature (e.g., Davidson & Henderson, 2010) that institutions perpetuate the notion that autism is a deficit. Although using a different definition and unit of analysis than Parsloe (2015), we also find autistic agency is an important component of constructing an online autistic identity.

We contribute to the literature in several ways. The topic of accessibility and WCAG 2.0 standards dominate technology discussions (Evans et al., 2017). We contend that access is not enough; it is imperative that websites promote a welcoming digital campus climate. Additionally, we show how institutions use habitualization – all institutions in this study dichotomize students as abled or disabled, and placed autistic students in the disabled category. This binary was unnoticed. By repeatedly narrowing alternative choices such as autism as a form of diversity or part of human variation, institutions naturalize the concept of autism as disability. Furthermore, we demonstrate distinctions within the overarching category of two-year colleges and disaggregated a classification typically treated as monolithic by existing disability research (e.g., Brown, 2017). We advance the literature on students' self-disclosure by demonstrating how institutional website content creates and reinforces the reasons (e.g., ignorance; Van Hees et al., 2015) that autistic students provide for choosing not to disclose. Finally, we address the lack of scholarship produced by and with neurodiverse people.

Significance and implications for practitioners

Community colleges are a critical pathway to postsecondary education and career options for autistic individuals (Wei et al., 2015). Prospective students visit institutional websites before the campuses themselves (Fishman & Love, 2015) and current students utilize institutional websites to access course materials, email platforms, and student services. Therefore, it is imperative that practitioners make their websites more welcoming, inclusive, and equitable spaces. To that end, we propose five recommendations for practitioners.

First, we challenge practitioners and postsecondary institutions to reconceptualize autism from a nondeficit perspective. One method practitioners can employ is to avoid using medical frameworks to plan autism events. In general, if it would be socially unacceptable to hold fundraisers or charity events for other minoritized student groups (e.g., based on race or sexual orientation), then practitioners should refrain from this type of activity for autistic individuals. Practitioners can foster nondeficit understandings by incorporating concepts of neurodiversity.

Second, unlike updating text in print materials, changing website content is a low-cost and quick process. Staff members who manage the college website, or individual departmental webpages, must assess current text to determine inclusivity. In the next paragraph, we offer suggestions for nondeficit and autistic-authored materials that can be added to webpages.

Third, this research highlights the many ways in which campus climate restricts and controls the discourse around autism. The lack of autism content, particularly the omission of autistic agency, perpetuates the power dynamic where non-autistic people define autism and this limits the opportunity for nondeficit understandings. Institutions can amplify autistic agency by incorporating materials produced by autistic students, faculty, staff, alumni, and organizations. For example, practitioners could add links on their webpages to publications from the Autism Self Advocacy Network (see Ashkenazy & Latimer, 2013, *Navigating College: A Handbook on Self Advocacy*).

Fourth, practitioners can use digital spaces to develop autistic community. For example, the office of admissions could host a frequently asked questions webpage where questions from incoming students are addressed by current autistic students in an anonymous manner. Practitioners can also build upon existing career service tools (e.g., job boards) to create a virtual network of autism-friendly employers and

autistic alumni mentors to cultivate transferable skills and employment opportunities. It is important for practitioners to depict these connections on institutional websites so that current and prospective students know about the opportunities.

Fifth, disability service professionals can dismantle the medical paradigm by updating their documentation policies to follow current Association on Higher Education and Disability guidelines (AHEAD, 2012). Specifically, practitioners should use a holistic assessment process that includes the students' self-report as an important form of documentation.

Areas for future research

While we extend the concept of digital campus climate from LGBTQ+ (Taylor et al., 2017) to autism, further research should explore how other minoritized populations are depicted and expand beyond the power dynamics of *official* institutional communications to include messages found on social media. We discovered tensions between qualitative content analysis methods (e.g., patterns by institutional geographic location) and regression models that produced non-significant statistical results. There are many reasons for statistically non-significant findings; however, inconsistent results indicate further exploration is necessary to determine what prompts institutions to include autism information on their websites.

Several website references were for continuing education courses or faculty autism trainings. Faculty are underprepared to work with autistic students (McKeon et al., 2013) and hold negative perceptions (Gibbons et al., 2015); therefore, anti-ableism training is imperative. Limited research examines autism training for faculty; we second the call made by Austin and Peña (2017) for research on faculty development that make significant and critical changes.

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