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Neurodiversity Inclusive Practices in Higher Education: Using a Needs Assessment to Spur Change Throughout University Systems

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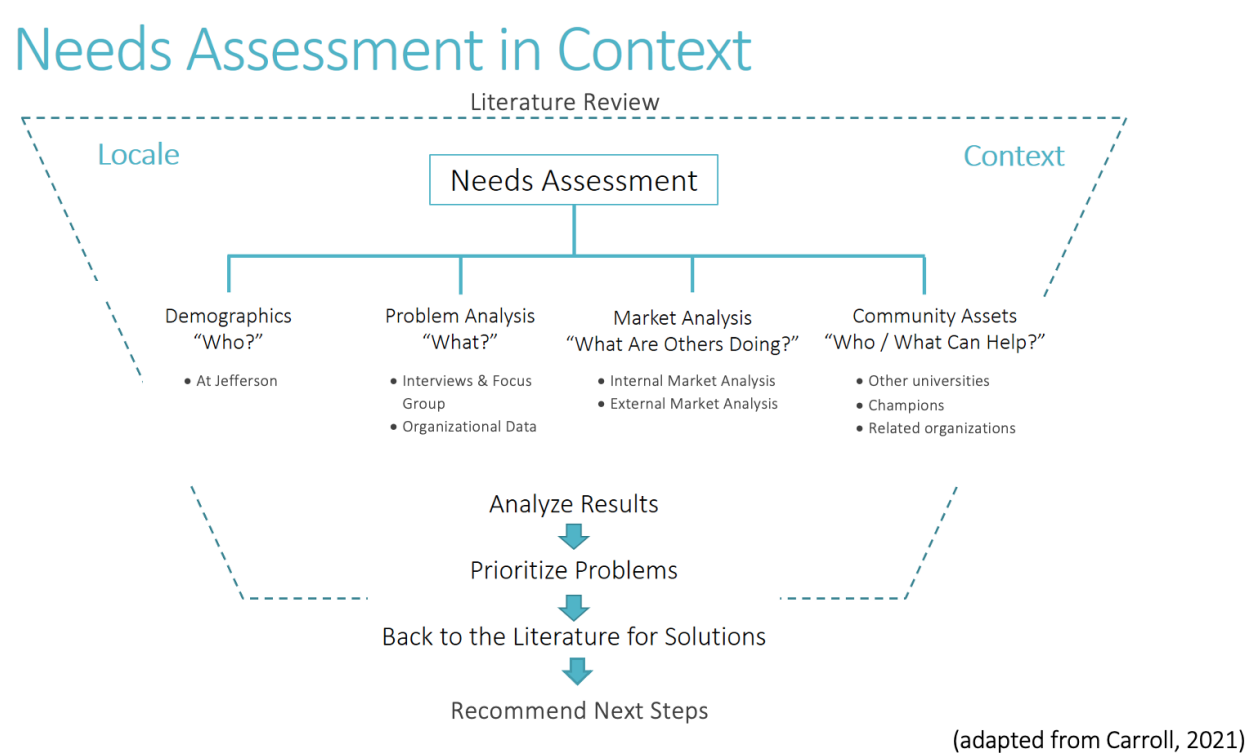
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Introduction:

- Approximately 50% of autistic people have average or above average intelligence, and growing numbers of autistic young adults attend college¹
- Autistic students experience poor outcomes in college despite being academically well qualified. 34.9% of autistic young adults attempt college within 6 years of high school². Of those, approximately 39% will graduate³.
- In higher education, there may be a mismatch in supports needed by autistic students versus supports provided.
 - Autistic students report difficulty with sensory overload, mental health concerns, and daily living tasks.⁴
 - The majority of supports for autistic students focus on academics, which is a mismatch from autistic students' self-reported needs.⁵

Methods:

Figure 1: Needs Assessment Procedure⁶:



- **Demographics:** through literature search, census data, and internet search
- **Problem Analysis:** through interviews, as described below
- **Market Analysis:** identified 3 proximate universities with varying levels of targeted support for matriculated autistic students
- **Community Assets:** identified 1) external universities and nonprofit organizations and 2) internal university champions who could assist with program development

Problem Analysis:

This needs assessment was determined to not require IRB approval, as it did not collect personal information from the participants

Data Collection:

Participant Inclusion Criteria: Participants included those who were involved in autism-related studies or programming OR involved in student diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in identified university

Semi-structured interviews (individual and group) completed via Zoom

- Instrument: 8-question semi-structured interview adapted from and guided by 8 Principles of Autism-Friendly Universities.⁷
- Two open-ended questions allowed individuals to add any pertinent information or opinions that were not expressed in other questions

8 Principles of an Autism Friendly University ⁷

1. Encourage and enable students to transition into and participate in university programmes.
2. Support and build capacity to equip students with Autism to meet academic challenges of everyday university life.
3. Support and build capacity to equip students with Autism to meet social challenges of everyday university life.
4. Seek to establish an Autism friendly operational environment.
5. Seek to combat the stigma around autism and recognise the diverse experience of those with the condition.
6. Develop understanding and relevant knowledge and skills within the University community.
7. Establish channels so that students with Autism can have a voice in various aspects of university life.
8. Increase employability of graduates with Autism

Methods Continued

Data Analysis Procedure:

- Transcription - interviews transcribed using Otter.ai software⁸
- Qualitative analysis - deidentified data analyzed via thematic analysis⁹ using secure nVivo analysis software¹²
- Increasing trustworthiness - member check, peer debriefing, and triangulation¹⁰
- Disability-Diversity (Dis)Connect Model¹¹ used to conceptualize problems & solutions

Results:

Demographics in Geographic Area:

- **1 in 4** autistic people in the identified geographic area are over 18.¹⁴
- On the primarily graduate campus of the university, no or few identified autistic students were identified. On the primarily undergraduate campus of the university, a small, but growing population of autistic students was identified.

Market Analysis Findings: Identified proximate universities that offered peer mentoring, case management, employment support, social opportunities, academic supports, housing supports, faculty training, and self-advocacy support, among other supports

Community Assets Findings: Identified autism-supporting non-profit organizations in geographic areas, internal university assets, and professionals at other proximate universities who could support inclusion efforts

Problem Analysis Findings:

Table 1: Interviewee Demographics

Primary Role	(n=11)
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	2
Student Support	2
Autism Leadership	4
Faculty (Nursing and Occupational Therapy)	2
Administration	1

Theme 1: Autism at University

- **Population of Autistic students** - Differed among campuses; likely more students who aren't being identified due to stigma, late diagnosis, & other factors
- **Strengths of University** - Strong team at the university, improving climate around diversity, equity, and inclusion, attributes of the university that may be a good fit for different learners
- **Supports Available** - Academic accommodations and resources, non-academic resources, coaching, and experts available
- **Potential Barriers to Autistic Student Success** - Need to disclose to access supports, lack of knowledge/understanding about autism in faculty and staff, lack of tailored support, potentially overwhelming sensory environment
- **Differences among campuses** - Differences in populations and supports available according at the primarily undergraduate campus versus the primarily graduate campus

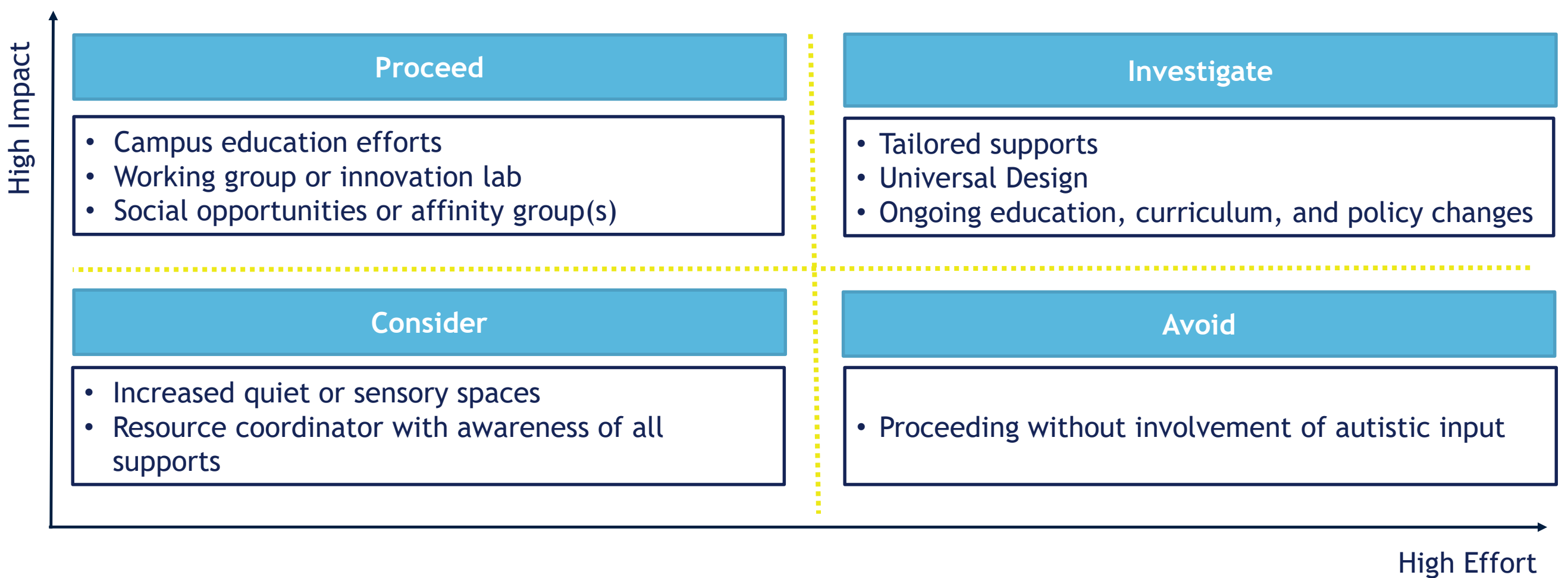
Theme 2: Future Potential of University

- **Reasons to support autistic students** - Dual benefit for students and university; the students access more supports to be successful in their education and the university accesses more diverse student base
- **Needs of university community** -
 - Student-level needs:* support for autistic students may be needed in: academics, coordination of supports, independent living, and employment.
 - University-level needs:* Participants identified a need for openness in admissions, education for faculty and staff, and a culture shift around neurodiversity.
- **Suggestions for University** - Participants detailed several suggestions for next steps, covered in the matrix below
- **Considerations for next steps** - Listen to autistic voices, express organizational support, and consider financial impact of any actions

Conclusions & Implications:

Table 2: Areas of High Impact versus High Effort for Next Steps for Support for Autistic Students in University Setting

- All parts of needs assessment were considered to recommend next steps that were prioritized on an effort vs. impact matrix



Implications:

- The Needs Assessment process is a feasible solution at the higher education level
- Findings provide action steps in including autistic students fully in university life
- OTD student projects can be used to engage key stakeholders and enact change in the higher education setting
- Action steps in “Proceed” can serve as early wins in creating a more accessible campus for autistic students



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