

# Enhancing Success and Inclusion for Neurodivergent Learners in Studio-Based and Creative Programs

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We ask you to join us in creating a culture that reflects...

**Access and Inclusion**

and

**Civility and Respect**

...this week and in all aspects of our organization.

# How can embedded academic support become a complementary accessibility strategy, particularly in creative education and studio-based programs?



# Session Roadmap



**The Challenge:** Explore how studio-based learning environments and creative education pedagogy create unique challenges and opportunities for neurodivergent learners



**The Research Foundations:** Examine what relevant research teaches us, and what we can learn from existing research-based methodologies



**The SAS Model:** Examine the Student Assistants for Success model, an adapted version of embedded support specific to creative education



**The Outcomes:** Review preliminary outcomes from an innovative embedded support initiative developed within creative disciplines



**The Takeaways:** Consider implications for working with students with disabilities, and discuss practical strategies for implementing similar approaches on your own campus

# The Challenge

**Understanding the context of creative education  
and the needs of neurodivergent learners**

# ***Creative Education is Different***

- Immediate immersion in major-specific or studio-based coursework
- High cognitive load involving ideation, problem-solving and visual-spatial reasoning
- Feedback loop that involves group critiques which can be emotionally charged and difficult to navigate

# ***Creative Disciplines & Retention***

- As compared to traditional liberal arts programs, students in creative majors:
  - More likely to take longer to complete their degree
  - May be more likely to leave college in first two years



# ***Neurodivergent Students in Creative Majors***

- Art & Design schools report rising numbers of neurodivergent learners
- Creative, hands-on, project based learning may be attractive to students who don't see themselves as traditional learners

# *Challenges in Creative Disciplines*

- Executive functioning needs can be even more of a challenge when there is high demand for planning, self-directed learning, long-term time management, and sustained task effort.
- Social communication needs may impact engagement in critique, studio-based learning environments, and the communication skills needed in the “feedback loop.”

# The Accommodation Gap

- Do traditional, common accommodations that exist in higher education work well for studio-based disciplines?



## Accommodation Fit vs. Accommodation Need

Students in creative disciplines may still need accommodations.

Common accommodations may not fully address barriers with:

- long-term project management
- iterative feedback cycles
- task initiation
- sustained engagement
- participation in studio culture

Example: **Extended Time**

✓ Provides additional time

But may not address:

- planning
- pacing
- executive functioning
- staying connected to critique cycles

# The Disclosure Gap

- Are there reasons why students with disabilities may be less likely to disclose and seek (and utilize) accommodations within creative disciplines?



# Neurodiversity prevalence vs. Under-reporting

- Faculty in Art & Design institutions report experiencing increasing numbers of neurodivergent students in their courses, with some reporting up to 40% of their students sharing that they are neurodivergent
- Yet, many Art & Design institutions report rates of students registering for accommodations at lower rates than national norms

# Shortcomings of Traditional Academic Support Models (tutoring)

- Focus on content, study skills, and writing assignments
- May not address design-specific language and tools
- Set apart from the studio environment itself
- May be perceived as irrelevant to creative coursework

# Questions posed from understanding these challenges

- What academic support structures best promote access and success in these environments?
- How do we support neurodivergent students or those with other disabilities who need help but may not access accommodations in creative disciplines?

# The Research-Based Foundations

Understanding the research and what we can  
learn from existing academic support models

# What does research tell us about embedded support?

- Research consistently demonstrates positive outcomes associated with embedded academic support models.



# Supplemental Instruction



# Embedded Tutoring

Support is given in the classroom



Immediate access to assistance



Reduced barriers to help-seeking



Strong alignment with course context

# Shortcomings for Studio-Based Courses

- Developed primarily for lecture-based courses or STEM programs
  - Embedded tutoring, unlike SI, doesn't include an out of class time session
- SI “lessons” are heavily content-focused, while creative programs needs support that is heavily process-focused

# Executive Functioning Coaching

*EF may impact:*

- *Planning & time management*
- *Task initiation and completion*
- *Organization*
- *Self-monitoring*
- *Goal-directed persistence*

- Coaching is focused on skill-development and improved self-regulated learning

# Additional Models Reviewed

- Facilitated Study Halls
  - Structured support and monitoring helps to increase assignment completion rates, and allows students to attain self-regulated learning and meta-cognitive strategies.
- Body Doubling
  - Strategy where the individual works on tasks alongside another person
  - Goal to increase accountability for task completion and use of coping strategies when completing tasks.

# Belonging and engagement as framework for supporting success

- Sense of belonging  
→ academic engagement
- Help seeking behavior  
→ persistence to degree
- Students are more likely to succeed if they:
  - Feel connected
  - Know where to seek help
  - Have positive peer relationships
  - View help-seeking as normal and accepted

# The Student Assistants for Success (SAS) Model

**Examining SAS as a model of adapted embedded academic support specially designed for creative disciplines and studio-based learning environments.**

# Why we built SAS

- Institutional questions about how we better support students in our creative disciplines, particularly those with disabilities
- Concerns about patterns of high DFW in foundational courses within our highly sequenced design programs
- Factors that gave rise to the need for a new model:
  - Faculty observations
  - Increased demand on disability services office
  - Retention concerns
  - Bottleneck effect in foundational studio classes
  - Increased skill gaps in post-pandemic climate

# Emerging questions

- How do we support students – particularly neurodivergent learners – before they reach a point of academic crisis in their studio courses?
- How do we assist students in their foundational creative coursework with developing the skills for success later in their degree progression?

# Key components

- Embedded into the studio learning environment or production space
- Discipline-specific, skills- and process-focused
- Peer-led support provided by upper-division students in the same major
- Available to all students
- Coaching model

# Where does SAS occur?

- Architecture studios
- Studio classrooms for Animation, Graphic Design, and Game Art & Design
- Fashion Design studios
- Sound stage, editing room, and production sets



# Discipline Specific Support

- Prep and practice for critique and feedback
- Reinforcement of technical and software skills
- Facilitation of collaborative learning and creative progress
- Project planning time management skills
- Creative problem solving
- Understanding the studio workflow
- Project and production management skills

# Executive functioning support

- Task initiation & sustaining effort
- Breaking down large projects
- Self-monitoring of progress
- Goal setting
- Managing ambiguity



# Supporting Studio-Specific Challenges

- SAS helps students navigate:
  - Studio culture
  - Public critique
  - Communication demands
  - Professional expectations
  - Ambiguous assignment demands

## Example of SAS: Film Production Course

- In class support:
  - Models workflow and equipment skills
  - Reinforcing concepts and technical skills
  - Answering questions about equipment use
  - Workflow guidance
- Outside of class:
  - Project planning & organization
  - Facilitating teamwork & social communication
  - Building time management skills
  - Providing extra guidance on technical skills

# Film Pro Course: Outcomes Targeted

- Successful completion of assignments and long-term projects
- Increased ability to work with and manage a team for a production (social communication, leadership skills)
- Improved confidence with new and novel equipment

→ Course success + skills needed to be more independent in further coursework

# The Outcomes

**Examining the data, feedback, and student  
experience from implementation of SAS**

# Metrics for Analyzing Impact

- Outcome Data
  - DFW rates
  - Course completion
  - GPA
- Retention Data
  - Persistence to next course in sequence
  - Progression through major
- Feedback and other indicators
  - Student feedback
  - Faculty survey
  - Observations
  - Utilization data
  - Feedback from SA's

# SAS Reach, Scale and Outcomes

\*Data snapshot from Spring 2026



Students  
Reached

**180**



Courses  
Supported

**8**



Majors  
Supported

**4**



Success Rate

**94.4%**



DFW Rate

**3.3%**



Avg GPA

**3.24**



Courses with  
100% Success

**4**



Historical  
DFW Reduction

**66%**

# Changes in Course Success Rate

Measure	Historical Benchmark	SAS Courses
DFW Rate	7.4%	3.3%
Difference	—	55% lower
Course Success Rate	92.6%	96.7%

This data compares outcomes in foundational studio courses within the first two years in the target majors. The highest DFW rate pre-implementation of SAS was 9.8%.

# Faculty Perspectives

- Noted positive impact on:
  - Assignment completion
  - Academic confidence
  - Help-seeking behaviors
  - Student engagement
- Praised SA's for ability to
  - Clarify expectations
  - Model the steps of a task or steps for software
  - Encourage active participation

# Big Picture Highlights

- Focused embedded support allows for broader reach than traditional tutoring
- Preliminary data confirmed positive impact on course completion
- Faculty input connected impact to target skill areas (executive functioning and discipline-specific skills)



# Outcomes for Student Assistants

- SAS serves as an opportunity for experiential learning for the Student Assistants themselves.
- Discipline-specific skill development
- Leadership opportunities
- Practices technique and software skills

## What may explain the outcomes?



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Support occurred where learning happened.

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Support was discipline-specific and context-aware.

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Executive functioning support was embedded into coursework.

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Peer relationships reduced barriers to help-seeking.

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Support was proactive, timely, and universally available.

# The Takeaways

**Considering implications for working with students with disabilities, and practical strategies for implementing similar models**

# Accessibility challenges in creative education

- Some accommodations may be difficult to implement within iterative studio workflows.
- Students may continue to experience executive functioning barriers even when accommodations are in place.
- Students may not seek accommodations if they perceive them as less relevant to studio coursework.
- Support structures must account for both access and learning processes.

# The Missing Middle

Many campuses provide:

## **Universal Supports**

- Workshops
- Tutoring
- Study skills resources

and

## **Individualized Supports**

- Accommodations
- Disability services
- Coaching

## **What's Missing in the Middle:**

- What exist for students who need help but never access any of these services?
- Is there an effectiveness gap? Are there some supports that are less effective in some programs or disciplines?

# Embedded support as a complementary access strategy

- Does not replace accommodations, but works alongside
- Provides scaffolding to help students overcome barriers
- Brings support to where students learn, which provides access even to those who may be reluctant to seek a service like tutoring

# Extended Time

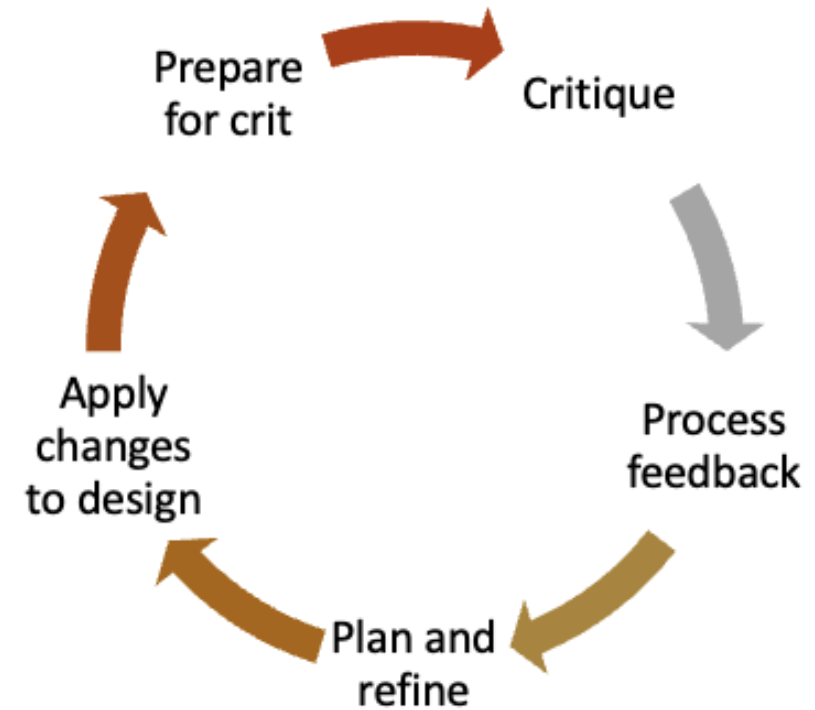
- Addresses the need for more time
- Supports processing speed, attention, and executive functioning challenges
- May prevent students from receiving the benefit of feedback during critique

Additional time may not address:

- Task initiation
- Understanding the ambiguity of assignments
- Sustaining engagement
- Project planning and pacing
- Executive functioning barriers

# Potential limited effectiveness in studio courses

- Delays in task completion may limit participation in later stages of the learning process



## Embedded Support

- Supports task initiation
- Supports project planning
- Supports sustained engagement
- Provides accountability and structure
- Keeps students connected to the feedback loop



# Embedded support as a complement to accommodations:

- Accommodations address access needs when needed
- Embedded support addresses ongoing learning and executive functioning needs
- Combined approaches may better support success in studio-based environments

## Identifying opportunities on your campus



- If we know that our students could benefit from academic supports but may experience barriers to access, what responsibility do we have to rethink where and how support is delivered?

# Discussion Questions

- Where are the "hidden barriers" to success on your campus that accommodations alone may not fully address?
- Which students are least likely to seek help—and how might support be redesigned to reach them?
- What opportunities exist to embed support within the environments where learning already occurs?
- How could disability services and student success initiatives work together to create additional pathways to access?

# Questions We Are Exploring Next

- Do SAS participants disclose at higher rates?
- Does SAS increase awareness of accommodations?
- Does SAS improve help-seeking?
- Can embedded support function as a bridge to disability services?
- How should these models be adapted for other disciplines?

# Session Evaluation

[tiny.cc/8zu1101](https://tiny.cc/8zu1101)

Thank you for attending!

Your feedback helps shape future programming.

