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

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AHEAD Association on Higher Education And Disability®

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

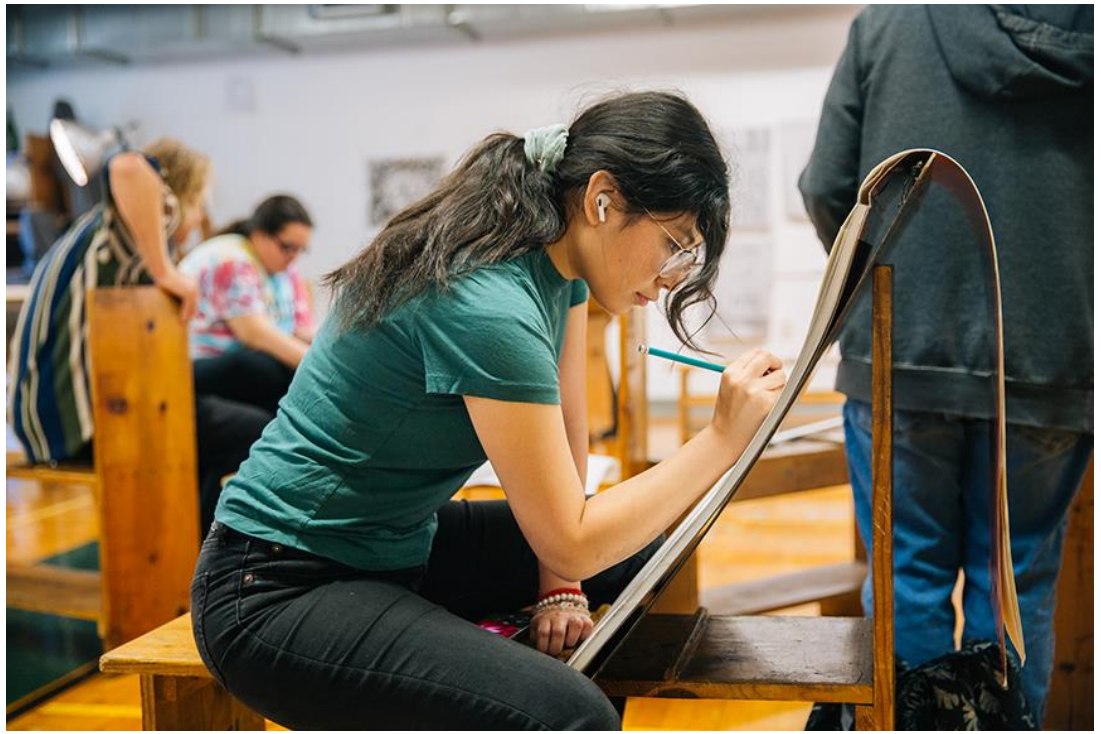
- Art & Design schools report rising numbers of neurodivergent learners
- Creative, hands-on, project based learning may be attractive to students who don't see themselves as traditional learners

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

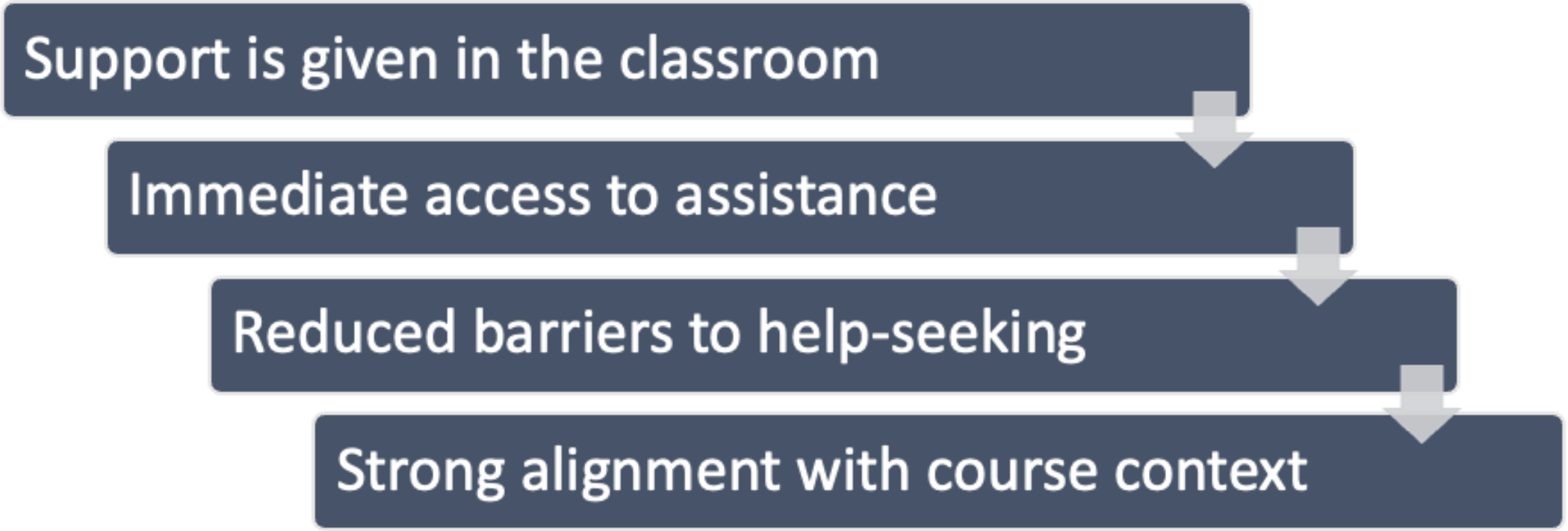
Understanding the research and what we can learn from existing academic support models

What does research tell us about embedded support?

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

Supplemental Instruction

Embedded Tutoring



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.

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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

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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	Courses Supported	Majors Supported	Success Rate
180	**8**	**4**	**94.4%**

DFW Rate	Avg GPA	Courses with 100% Success	Historical DFW Reduction
3.3%	**3.24**	**4**	**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?

- Support occurred where learning happened.
- Support was discipline-specific and context-aware.
- Executive functioning support was embedded into coursework.
- Peer relationships reduced barriers to help-seeking.
- 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

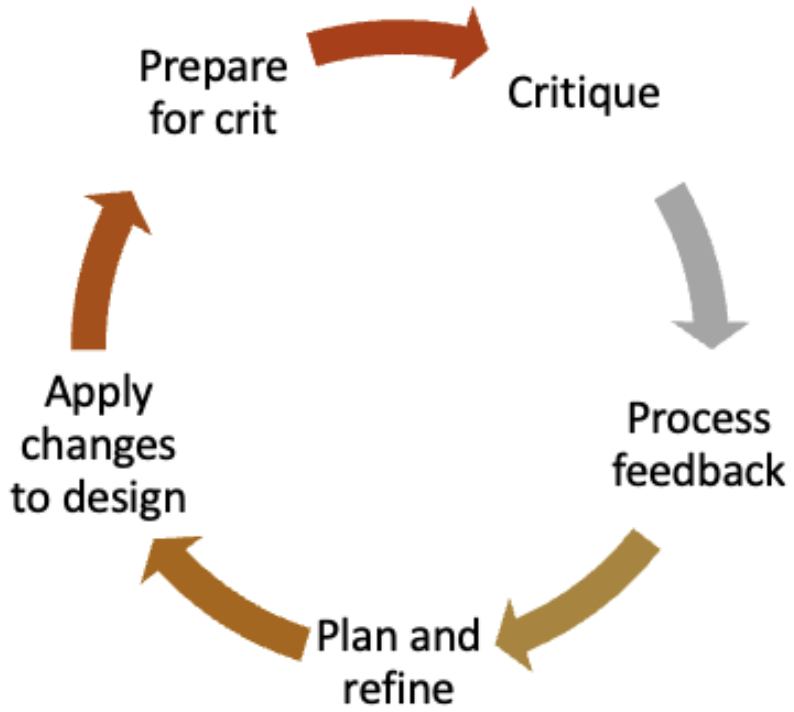
- Addresses the need for more time
- Supports processing speed, attention, and executive functioning challenges
- May prevent students from receiving the benefit of feedback during critique

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?