

THE DASS INSIDER

A NEWSLETTER FOR SMU FACULTY

INFORMATION ON DISABILITY SERVICES AND ACCESS ISSUES AFFECTING YOUR STUDENTS AND CLASSES

SMU

FALL 2025

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Sensory-friendly study and work spaces – MeSpace

Alexa Taylor

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You may have noticed one of the three stand-alone [MeSpace study pods](#) on campus this past spring semester. DASS, in collaboration with Hughes-Trigg Student Center and Hamon Arts Library, hosted three units on campus for a trial period. Users were able to spend time in the units and we received extremely positive feedback on the user survey.

MeSpace was developed here in Dallas by designers at Hollman, Inc. Their goal is to “increase productivity by eliminating distraction, while transforming community”. The unit is meant to accommodate a full spectrum of neurotypes, employing flexibility to control lighting, desk height, and air flow. Students reported feedback like “I love how it can help me focus!” and appreciated a “private space that you can get away and LOCK IN very comfortably”. Vanderbilt also has utilized MeSpace on their campus and are expanding units to support diverse learners.

With the positive feedback, the DASS office explored how MeSpace study pods could meet a variety of needs on campus more permanently. During a round-table discussion in April, students, faculty, and staff discussed how the units might benefit both employees and students, minimizing construction costs for building private work spaces. Others liked that they were movable so they could serve one population in a building, but could also be moved to another part of the building or campus if needed. The President’s Commission on the Needs of Persons with Disabilities also discussed the benefits of the units and decided to financially support the initiative moving forward. DASS is currently facilitating the purchase of the three existing units so they can stay on campus (Fondren Library, near Starbucks; Hamon Arts Library 1st floor; HTSC 2nd floor, back corner) for the benefit of our community. If you have a location on campus that you think would be great for future MeSpace study pods, let alexat@smu.edu know!

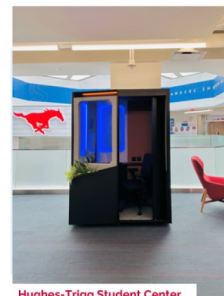
DASS Staff and Welcome

Welcome! Our office is the primary contact for all SMU students with disabilities and works with faculty and staff in making the accommodations process as seamless as possible. The abbreviated checklist on page 4 may be helpful as faculty transition to the system we use on our campus to meet the access needs of students with disabilities.

Director: Alexa Taylor
Asst Director: Michelle Bufkin
Learning Specialist: David Tylicki
Accommodation Coordinators: Jeanna Turay, Valiza Cameron-Patterson
DASS Administrative Assistant: Candy Brown



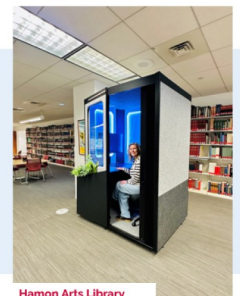
mespace
Unlocking Human Potential



Hughes-Trigg Student Center
Second Floor



Hughes-Trigg Student Center
First Floor



Hamon Arts Library
First Floor

Please join us for DASSapalooza on Thursday, Sept 4!

DASS invites **all faculty and staff** for our annual event to welcome DASS students to campus and kick off our semester! We will have DASS staff on hand to answer questions, refreshments and new and returning students to share DASS resources. Please make plans to join us on **Thursday, Sept. 4 from 4:30—5:30 pm in A-LEC 202N. We would love to see you there!**



DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS AND SUCCESS STRATEGIES PRESENTS:

DASSapalooza!

Join DASS staff members and students for **food and fun** while you learn about:

- The benefits of weekly academic coaching
- Students for New Learning, the SMU org. for (and led by!) neurodivergent students
- Our DASS Peer Mentor pilot program
- Meet your Coordinator

Thursday, Sept. 4
4:30-5:30 pm
A-LEC 202N



DASS Develops New Resources for Autistic SMU Students

David Tylicki and Valiza Patterson

In January, DASS launched an initiative to enhance support for SMU students on the autism spectrum. We built upon long-standing services within our Success Strategies program, including weekly academic coaching, a fall-term section of *UNIV 1210: Academic Success and Personal Development* tailored for neurodivergent students, and the student-led organization *Students for New Learning*, a chartered group led by and for neurodivergent students. Our aim throughout this project has been to move from reactive to proactive support, giving students the insight and tools they need to anticipate and navigate challenges before they arrive on campus.

After much research, including interviews with current autistic SMU students, we developed a one-hour, virtual orientation, *Thriving in College: A DASS Open House for Autistic Students and their Families*. Held on July 9, this session introduced *Know Before You Go*, a 30-question checklist that we designed to help students identify the academic and social changes and challenges they may face in transitioning from high school to college. We encouraged students to explore our companion guide, *Start Smart! What's New in College and How to Handle It*, which walks them through common college experiences and offers approaches for navigating them. We urged students to begin practicing the strategies and mindsets they learned right away.

Still, questions or challenges will arise in real time. To support students when that happens, we also created *Help Finder: Connect with the Right SMU Resource*, a guide designed to connect struggling students with the campus office, service, or individual who can best help. Taken together, these new resources provide a more structured path for autistic students to prepare for the transition to college and to advocate for themselves once they are here. All materials – including the checklist and guides – are available on [a page newly added to DASS Success Strategies section of our website](#). We encourage faculty and staff to explore these and share them with students who may benefit.

Did you Know?

Individuals with ASD are making their way onto college and university campuses in increasing numbers. As the number of students with ASD continues to climb, institutions of higher education will be faced with the challenge of expanding their supports and services to accommodate the diverse needs of this population. Dymond, S.K., Meadan, H. & Pickens, J.L. Postsecondary Education and Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Experiences of Parents and University Personnel. *J Dev Phys Disabil* 29, 809–825 (2017).

2025 Extra Mile Award - a 50th Celebration!

David Tylicki



Join us in honoring our 50th Extra Mile Award recipient, Dr. Bruce Levy, Senior Lecturer with the Department of English in Dedman College and the Department of Human-Centered Interdisciplinary Studies.

Students for New Learning, a student organization chartered by the Student Senate, provides support and networking opportunities to students with learning disabilities and ADHD. Since 2008, Students for New Learning, or SNL as we call it, has chosen 49 deserving faculty members from across campus to receive The Extra Mile Award, recognizing their excellent teaching of those who learn differently. Funding and support for this award are provided by the President's Commission on the Needs of Persons with Disabilities, reflecting how much SMU values faculty sensitivity to students with learning differences.

So, other than outstanding teaching techniques, what does it take to receive the Extra Mile Award? The students who nominated Dr. Levy described him as welcoming, caring, understanding, and engaging – passionate about what he teaches. We're sure he exhibits these exemplary traits with all of his students, but they are especially appreciated by us. Congratulations, Dr. Levy!

A Rare Accommodation: Flexible Attendance

Alexa Taylor



When a student's disabling condition is so severe and intermittently very impactful, DASS may recommend some flexibility with attendance, when reasonable for the particular course. Students who have been approved for this accommodation typically experience serious and chronic health conditions that could prevent them from attending at times. Students with diabetes, epilepsy, Cystic Fibrosis, Sickle Cell disease, Multiple Sclerosis, Crohn's disease, Lupus, Cancer, severe Migraines and others may be so impacted in unpredictable, but chronic ways, that the DASS office

recommends some flexibility with attendance.

Like other accommodations, the student will share their Letter of Accommodation (LOA) with each instructor. Those LOA's with the Flexible Attendance accommodation also come with three attached documents for review. One lays out the student's responsibility if they need to implement this accommodation. The next document provides guidance to both student and instructor on thinking through the essential elements of the course and how some flexibility might be allowed. Office for Civil Rights has provided suggestions to consider when making these decisions about what is reasonable for a particular course, in relation to allowing absences due to a disability. The third document is an agreement template that the instructor and student should use to document their plan for implementing the accommodation for a particular course. This guide is meant to be helpful in thinking proactively through all of the elements of the course (classroom attendance, quizzes, homework assignments, tests/exams, method of communication that is expected and the time frame of that communication, etc.). Each course is different (labs vs. lecture, performance classes, classes with lots of student interaction and classes with very little interaction among students) and we are here to assist instructors in thinking through how this accommodation is best implemented in their course.



Below is the language you'll find in the Letter of Accommodation, if a student with this accommodation enrolls in your class: "Flexible Attendance: granted flexibility in making up disability-related absences due to a medical condition. Since this disability significantly impairs the student's functioning intermittently and without notice, your professor's understanding and flexibility are being requested to allow the student a reasonable opportunity to make up work without being penalized for a few absences. In essence, the student's grade should not be negatively affected on the basis of an attendance or missed exam policy IF agreed-upon arrangements are met. This accommodation does not sanction unlimited absences or lack of timely notification from the student when absent. The student remains responsible for completing course work and coordinating with you on meeting adjusted deadlines, if any. If the professor believes absences are becoming excessive, please contact DASS. Review the 3 attached documents please." The documents can also be found on our [website](#).

We fully understand that this accommodation may be difficult for some instructors to implement. It is important that each instructor goes through the "interactive process" when there is dispute or disagreement about providing the recommended flexibility. Most issues arise when instructors fail to finalize a written agreement with their student and then things get complicated near the end of the semester. We strongly recommend you meet with each student privately to discuss this accommodation, document your plan, and follow up with your student if the student is approaching the limits in the agreement. We always welcome calls and questions about how to best implement this accommodation as it is important that students are given equivalent assignments and tests (if they miss a test) and are not retaliated against for requesting this accommodation. We understand that some courses will have less flexibility than others and students are expected to follow the agreement closely.



Faculty FAQ: Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Q: I understand there are a growing number of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who attend college. What are the main features of this condition?

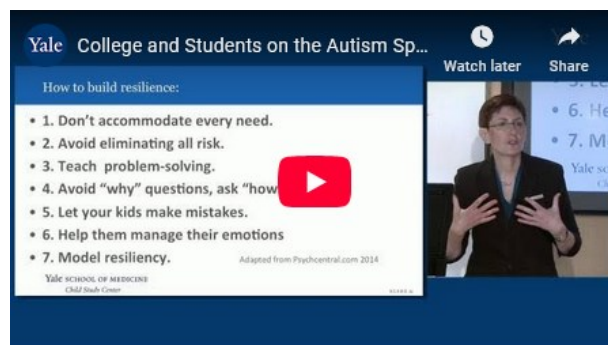
A: People with ASD (formerly known as Autism and Asperger's Disorder) often lack the social understanding that comes more intuitively to the neurotypical person. They may have difficulty interpreting social cues from others, such as facial expressions and tone of voice, and can be absolutely literal in the way they interpret communications. Engaging in a reciprocal conversation can be challenging for them, as they find it hard to start and maintain a two-way conversation; they may unintentionally monopolize discussions. They are often highly intelligent, and may have an intense interest in a particular subject. Structure and routine have been found to be helpful to individuals with ASD.

The Yale School of Medicine video below, "College Students on the Autism Spectrum," is quite informative.

Additional resources for faculty:

Kathy DeOrnellas's 2015 article "[Teaching College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders](#)" on the Faculty Focus website.

The article and video "[Understanding Asperger Syndrome: A Professor's Guide](#)" by the Organization for Autism Research (OAR) Marci Wheeler's 2014 article "[Academic Supports for College Students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder](#)" available on [Policy Commons](#).



Accessibility Training Opportunities for Faculty

Michelle Bufkin

In Spring 2024, DASS highlighted a new tool promoted by OIT, PopeTech, to help make Canvas courses more accessible to all learners. We were pleased to see a special training on this tool as part of the Fall 2025 OIT Training Seminars.

Here are the details:

Accessibility for ALL with PopeTech Accessibility

<https://www.smu.edu/oit/training>

August 21, 2025

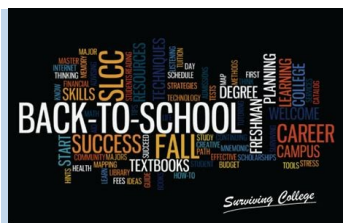
1:30 p.m.

An accessible course is a benefit to all! Recently introduced in Canvas, PopeTech provides a way to evaluate how accessible your course is and quickly make changes in your current workflow. In this workshop, you will:

- See a demo of the accessibility tool
- Learn the 5 most common accessibility issues in course design
- Participate in Q&A



Start of Semester Checklist



The start of each semester is a

good time to go over the basics related to DASS students and accommodations. The most urgent are making plans for the Syllabus Statement and reviewing Accommodation Letters on DASS Link. The complete checklist of items is found on our website under the [FAQ section](#).

VISIT US AT DASS

5800 Ownby Drive—Suite 202 Loyd Center
2nd Floor - Altshuler Learning Enhancement Center
Entrance near Gate 3 of Ford Stadium
Parking in the Meadows Garage

Phone: 214-768-1470

Email: dass@smu.edu



DASS IS MORE THAN ACCOMMODATIONS.

For details on how DASS supports our campus:

[DASS Summary](#)

For resources that may be helpful to faculty and staff:

[DASS Resources](#)