

College Student Perceptions of Peers with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract

Much of the emphasis on research regarding Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has been directed toward childhood, with much less attention paid to ASD order among adults. In particular, very little research has been done on college students with ASD making the transition to living away from home. Furthermore, little research has been done on the social skills of these students and the relationships with their peers. Past research has shown that labels of mental illness creates more stigma towards those with mental illness. The present study is a between subject design, which gave college students ($n=129$) an identical vignette that describes behaviors characteristic of a student with an ASD diagnosis either with the label of ASD or without. Participants then answered questions regarding their attitudes of the described student on a Likert scale of one to five with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree". On average students reported more positive perceptions of individuals when they perceived the unique behaviors described in the vignette to be due to ASD, compared to students who did not attribute the unique behaviors to ASD ($t(1, 125)=-2.026, p<.05$). These results suggest that having a known reason to explain otherwise unusual or odd social behaviors, such as ASD, was associated with more positive perceptions compared to conditions in which participants had no such explanation. This suggests that knowing a person has a diagnosis of ASD may elicit more empathy from other student peers in a social situation for students transitioning to college.

Background

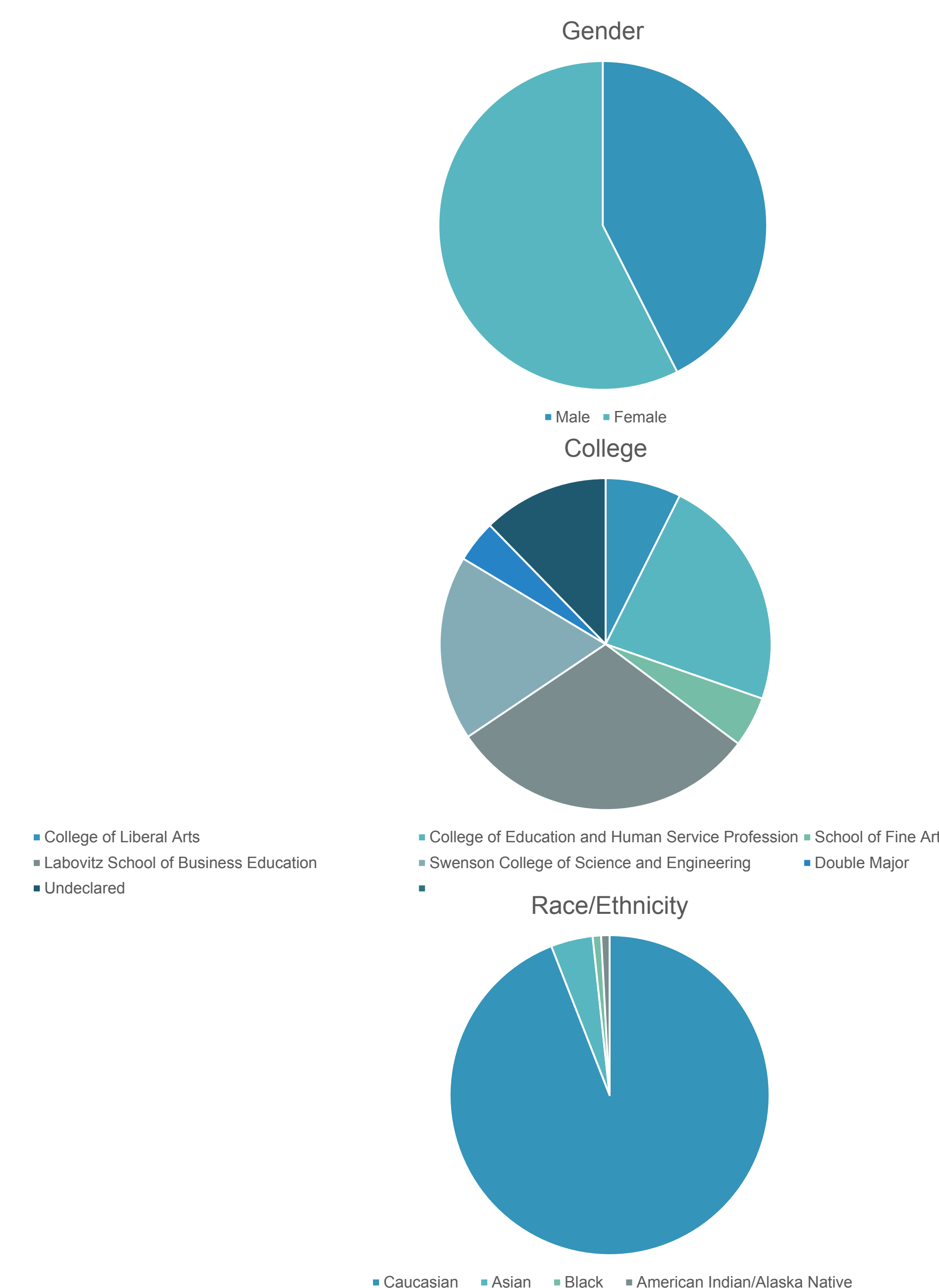
- Autism Spectrum Disorder is the highest growing developmental disorder in children (Hendrickson, Carson, Woods-Groves, Mendenhall, & Scheidecker, 2013).
- Students with autism spectrum disorder often have impairments in social skills, which hinders their ability to make friends, which in turn makes the transition to independent living more challenging (Hendrickson, Carson, Woods-Groves, Mendenhall, & Scheidecker, 2013).
- Perceived labels and the stereotypes that come with them can hinder the labeled persons social interactions
- Very little research done on how adults with autism spectrum disorder function, and furthermore, according to Gelbar, et al., only twenty articles related to ASD in college students were found. (Nevill, & White, 2011; 2014).
- Current research done calls for transition programs in colleges as students with ASD received more assistance in elementary and secondary institutions. (Nevill, & White, 2011).

Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1: All students will be more welcoming to the student who is not labeled with autism spectrum disorder.
- Hypothesis 2: Men will be more open than women to autism spectrum students across conditions.
- Hypothesis 3: Students in the STEM majors will be more open to a student with autism spectrum disorder, based on the outcome of the previous study, regardless of labels.
- Hypothesis 4: Students who have experienced autism spectrum disorder personally or through a relative will have less stigma and be more open to the student with autism spectrum disorder.

Methods

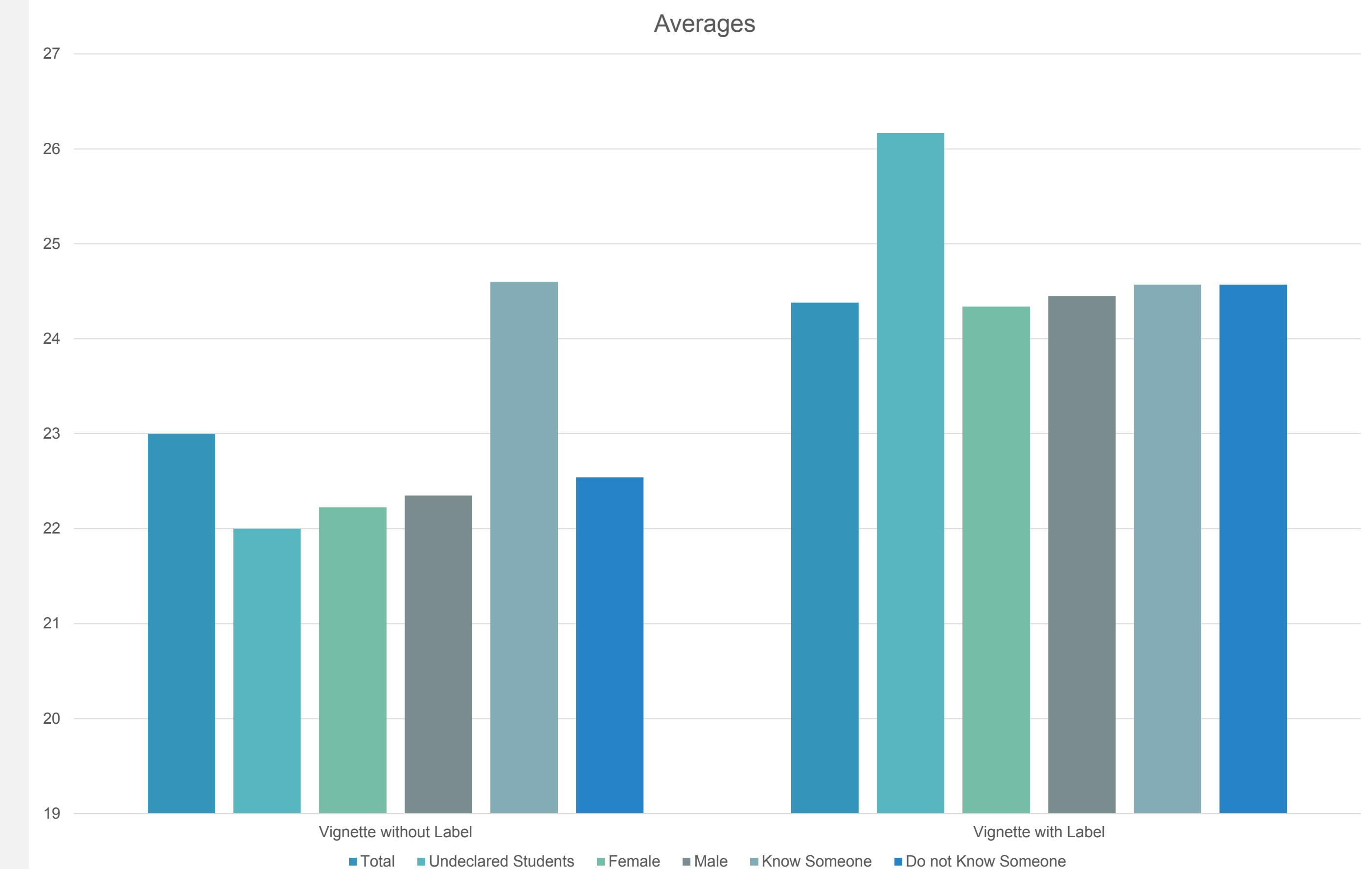
- Data was collected using an online survey through the Sona System.
- Replicated methodology used by Nevill and White (2011)
- Used a modified version of the openness scale created by Harnum et al.
- 2 vignettes were given, both with the same description of a student who displays behaviors of someone with ASD
- One vignette did not have an ASD label, and the other had the ASD label



Results

- Hypothesis 1: Results suggest a significant difference in mean total scores between the two conditions ($t(125) = -2.026, p < .05$).
- Hypothesis 2: There were no significant overall differences between men ($M = 23.86$ and $sd = .46$) and women ($M = 23.38$ and $sd = .53$) on openness ($f(1) = .266, p > .05$).
- Hypothesis 3: There were no significant differences among students from Swenson College of Science and Engineering ($M = 23.682$ and $sd = .849$) compared to other majors on openness ($t(123) = 1.227, p > .05$). A two-way ANOVA found that undeclared students significantly differed from each other across conditions ($f(14) = 4.433, p < .05$).
- Hypothesis 4: Participants who know someone with ASD ($M = 24.58$ $sd = .72$) will be more open than those who do not know someone with ASD ($M = 23.46$ $sd = .395$), was also not supported. ($f(1) = 1.89, p > .05$).

Results



Conclusions

- Students are more open to students who display behaviors concurrent with Autism Spectrum Disorder when the student has the label of ASD.
- Possible reason could be that knowledge of the disorder helps categorize the behaviors and help with understanding the nature.
- More education in post-secondary education is a necessary tool that could drastically influence the lives of students with ASD. If there is better knowledge of how the behavior is displayed in adults, the more open college students will be towards their peers.
- Transitional programs that assist students with ASD could be a useful tool in assisting ASD students into colleges or universities and increasing campus-wide awareness of the disorder.

Gelbar, N. W., Smith, I., & Reichow, B. (2014). Systematic review of articles describing experience and supports of individuals with autism enrolled in college and university programs. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 44*(10), 2593-2601. Retrieved from: PsychInfo

Hendrickson, J.M., Carson, R., Woods-Groves, S., Mendenhall, J., & Scheidecker, B. (2013). UI reach: A postsecondary program serving students with autism and intellectual disabilities. *Education and Treatment of Children, 36*, 169-194.

Nevill, R.E.A., & White, S.W. (2011). College students' openness toward autism spectrum disorders: Improving peer acceptance. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 41*, 1619-1628.

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