

I. Research Proposal Cover Page

Title of Research Proposal Analysis of Academic Library Space for Neurodiverse Students
Abstract <p>The Sunshine State Community College (SSCC) believes that it is important to make sure that all students are provided with the resources that will help them succeed, including the neurodiverse. This group of students are typically marginalized, particularly within the Academic library setting. Additional research should be conducted to understand if the SSCC Library has this problem and if there is a way to resolve the issue. Through a collaboration with the Disability Resources Office, the scope of the research includes a two-step plan: 1.) To create a user needs survey that will help SSCC Library understand the neurodiverse students better, and 2.) Conduct key informant interviews that evaluate the relationship current staff and administration have to the neurodiverse students on campus. This research will gather information about the user needs of neurodiverse patrons who attend the SSCC Library as well as help the administration evaluate the need to create a sensory room.</p>

Project Start Date January 2023	Project Completion Date December 2023
Amount Requested \$2090	Proposal Submission Date November 30, 2022

Principal Investigators' Names and Affiliations <p>Alyssa Donofrio: Reference Librarian, Sunshine State Community College Sara Hack: Director of Library Services, Sunshine State Community College Elizabeth Keener: Archive Librarian, Sunshine State Community College Janice Steinhoff: Digital Resource Librarian, Sunshine State Community College</p>
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II. Statement of Need & Significance of Study

Needs Assessment

The main function of The Sunshine State Community College (SSCC) is to prepare all students and alumni to be active participants in the world and educated members of society. Academic libraries have a vital role to play in this function. The responsibility of the library is to "provide resources in all forms, represent all perspectives, and make them accessible to students..." (Love, 2001, p. 76). To accomplish this, academic libraries must provide diverse initiatives to all students regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, socio-economic status, physical or intellectual challenges, neurodiversities, non-traditional age students, or international students. "It is through diversity initiatives that we can expect to improve the educational outcome for students by presenting the library as a vital part of their college experience" (Switzer, 2008, p. 280). Out of a population of 200,000 students, the Sunshine State Community College has a documented 293 students that fall on the neurodiversity spectrum. Neurodivergent students can often get distracted or overwhelmed in populated areas such as libraries, with things like the number of people around or noise levels causing overstimulation and sensory overload. Providing a library space to balance their sensory needs can help students feel comfortable, get them focused, and help them succeed in their college experience. "It is important that people who need and desire behavioral support or intervention to promote...social, academic,...skill have access to those services" (Baumer, 2021). Many universities and academic libraries have pledged a commitment to neurodiversity, as evidenced on their websites and diversity statements. However, despite this written commitment, there continues to be a need for improvement in this area. In order to assist with this issue, we seek to further study and evaluate the effectiveness of our effort towards neurodiverse students and offer a possible solution in the addition of a sensory study room.

Significance of Study

Academic libraries are the epicenter of higher education. Through this lens, many of the greatest influencers start to see the world. Students come to these libraries to conduct their research, collaborate with their peers, and, most importantly, ask staff questions to help them along on their journey of knowledge. But what happens if society changes with each era and becomes more open-minded and fluid, but these academic libraries do not grow to understand or embrace this change? As a result, students may stop relying on our knowledge base, or worse, they could use older-disproven knowledge to support their claims without realizing it.

DEIA (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility) is ethically essential to emphasize. We must ask these challenging questions to get a better understanding of the steps leadership and management take to advocate for neurodiverse patrons. This study not only adds statistics on neurodiversity in libraries but may also act as a scale on how detached academic libraries are to their patrons on the spectrum. This study also helps us understand the thoughts and opinions of how our neurodiverse students see the SSCC library system, what improvements we could make to make the library more useful for these students, and will serve as an evaluation to allow us to understand if we need a sensory room.

Literature Review

The term neurodiversity can include many people with differing ways of thinking and processing information. “Neurodiversity describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways...the differences are not viewed as deficits” (Baumer, 2021). Sensory overload and overstimulation is one such difference common with neurodivergent students. There is not much literature on the concept of introducing sensory rooms into academic libraries. Fortunately, there are at least a few articles which talk about the impact that having sensory rooms could have on students. Sensory rooms are starting to become more popular in public library circles and are being talked about in Academic library discussions. “Stigma, a lack of awareness, and lack of appropriate infrastructure...can cause

exclusion of people with neurodevelopmental differences” (Baumer, 2021). A review of this literature will help us better understand how sensory rooms can help neurodiverse students in academic libraries, as well as help SSCC understand what questions to ask the current neurodiverse students at the Disability Resources Office so we can improve their library experience.

Lopatovska and Regalado (2016) studied the use of library space in four academic libraries. This observational study did not particularly focus on neurodiverse patrons, however the implications of the use of library space can help direct space and services to consider diversity of the students. They state, “...the library as a locus of both academic and social activities...” (Lopatovska, 2016). They use observation and “semi-structured” interviews of students they observed to form the basis of their study. They conclude that “students use a wide variety of print and digital resources....to exhibit academic behaviors that would be expected in the library, students eat, drink, rest, and socialize,” (Lopatovska, 2016). This article notes the important roles that Academic libraries play in student lives, that students spend a great deal of time within libraries, using it as an academic hub as well as a social gathering place.

According to an article from the International Journal of Applied Research, the qualities of a good library space should be welcoming and attractive, inclusive, and should cater to diverse learning styles (NK, 2015). Anderson (2018), studied students with ASD “in their own words.” Based on her results she notes “...college students with ASD use the library as an escape and as a safe space away from sensory distractions” (Anderson, 2018). Considering the diversity of students within universities and the multiple uses of a library, providing quiet study space away from sensory distractions and developing diverse programs, both academic and social, can help students thrive in an academic setting.

An example of this type of quiet space is a low sensory room. Taylor Damian (2021) wrote an article for the Adelphi University Library about how low sensory rooms are beneficial to students who are neurodiverse. Low sensory rooms “allows our students to have some tools to

alleviate hyperstimulation or further engage senses caused by hypostimulation...[it is] safe space for students to be themselves and engage in various stimulating behaviors has taught them how to self-regulate.” (Damian, 2021) Based on the design and purpose of a low sensory room, it can be easily used as a place to study, read, and learn without the worry of sensory overload.

Ciszek (2012), discussed the need to “look beyond the traditional facets of diversity and strive to meet the needs of a diversifying population.” He suggests working with university offices who serve students with disabilities and training library staff to help students who have neurodiversities. Universal Design of Learning is discussed by Cruz (2019) as principles libraries can adopt to meet the needs of all users regardless of their specific learning needs. Remy & Seaman (2014) go on to note that teachers and librarians must be knowledgeable of the differences in students with ASD and to create environments “conducive to learning, both physical and emotional.”

Jones (2021) conducted research to determine “how users with ADHD feel about the research process through library resources.” Her specific questions were 1.) What emotions do students with ADHD experience when performing research and 2.) What are some approaches students with ADHD take when researching library resources? Results of her study showed that “undergraduates with ADHD are extremely self-aware of how their diagnosis affects their time management and organizational approaches to research. From this study, we can assume that students who are neurodiverse understand the resources and study atmosphere they require to be effective and efficient students.

Overstimulation and sensory overload are main issues for individuals who suffer from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety disorders, and autism (Queensland Health, 2022) These obstacles can make it more difficult for students who are neurodiverse to concentrate and study, as we provide resources for students, it is necessary to find a solution around this as well.

Research Goal & Questions

This research aims to understand if the goals of SSCC administration and library staff have been met for neurodiverse patrons. We will also try to analyze their understanding of accessibility and library space utilization and see if they have any suggestions for improvement within the system. From those results, we can develop innovative ways to incorporate meaningful initiatives into the daily function of the academic library system.

Questions we aim to ask: 1.) How often do students get sensory overload in the library? 2.) Is the library staff capable enough to handle any issues and questions neurodiverse patrons may have? 3.) Does the SSCC library space need to improve to help neurodiverse students feel more at ease? 4.) Would creating a sensory room for neurodiverse patrons in the library with overstimulation and sensory overload?

Definition of Key Concepts:

Neurodiversity: A difference in the way people view the world through experience and interaction, typically used when referring to people with ASD, ADHD, learning disabilities or other neurological developmental conditions. (Baumer, 2021).

Library Space: Infrastructure within a library which allows students to use it as an academic center for study and research or as a social gathering place. (Lopatovska, 2016).

Sensory rooms: Study rooms within a library which allow students to “alleviate hyperstimulation” or engage in behaviors to help self-regulate, calm, and focus. (Damian, 2021).

Sensory overload: When the five senses—light, sound, taste, touch, and/or smell—take in more information that your brain can process. (Queensland Health, 2022)

Overstimulation: Overwhelmed by all the input, the brain responds as it would to a life-threatening situation and enters fight, flight, or freeze mode. (Queensland Health, 2022)

III. Research Design

Methodology

First, the Library board of the Sunshine State Community College plans to conduct a Neurodiversity Improvement Survey for Students. This survey is designed to ask students who are diagnosed with any type of neurodiversity (ASD, ADHD, anxiety, PTSD, etc.), identified through the Disability Resource Office at SSCC, their perspectives on how the library system serves neurodiverse students as well as offer any suggestions for improvement. After that survey is concluded, the board will reconvene and start the process of the Key Informant Interviews. The 12 Key Informant Interviews are created to understand the Library Staff's perspective regarding the needs of neurodiverse patrons within the SSCC's library system. This data collection was created to identify what level of comfort our patrons experience in current library settings and study rooms, as well as what can be done to improve the library resources, and what is needed to make these patrons feel included and welcomed. These results can be compiled in a data set and compared to the student survey to see if the study rooms need to be improved or if a sensory room needs to be added to the library.

Research Design

Survey through Disability Resource Office: These surveys are useful for obtaining demographic information as well as understanding the needs and options of the patrons. The data extracted from this survey can help the researchers understand the perspective of the neurodiverse patrons as well as enlighten us to other ideas that may be typically overlooked.

Key Informant Interviews: These interviews are useful for understanding how members of our study, from similar demographics (neurodiverse students of SSCC), respond to our specific qualitative open-ended questions. In this setting we will interview those participants of SSCC who completed our questionnaire and gather information from their responses. This information can provide insight into the ease of accessibility for study rooms, as well as future library programs or resources, additional support for students, or additional areas of research.

Participants may elect to be interviewed by a researcher or fill out the questions on their own and submit their answers with the survey.

Details of the Disability Resource Survey sampling: The Disability Resource Office will identify neurodiverse students through their requested accommodations. The office will distribute surveys to these students through an anonymous survey available on Google Forms. A maximum allowance of 200 responses will be allowed before the survey is capped. Staff at the circulation desk can also request that neurodiverse patrons fill out the quick “Neurodiversity Improvement Survey for Students with ADHD or ASD at SSCC” when they enter the library. The survey consists of a total of 16 questions (11 Close ended and 5 Open ended) in order to achieve a balance of straight forward answers on patron needs as well as details on ideas for improvement.

Details of the Key Informant Interviews: A total of 30 emails will be sent out to Management, Circulation Staff, and Neurodiverse Patrons and will be capped at 12 that show interest in being interviewed. There will be an option to be interviewed in-person or online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Interviews will be conducted by two proctors. These individual interviews will focus on two main Groups: Circulation Staff and Library Administration. Each informant will also be emailed a list of questions that will be asked during the interview. As a thank you for their personal participation, they will be given a water bottle with the college’s logo. Refreshments will also be available for them during the in-person interviews.

Expected Outcomes

This survey will evaluate the comfort level of patrons in the library, issues patrons have with the way the library is set up, and how staff handles these issues. This survey will also gauge student interest in sensory rooms and will allow an evaluation of if this suggestion is correct for this student demographic. Additionally, this survey allows for discovery of newer programs or other resources that may assist these students with their research needs and overall library experience.

The Key Informant Interviews are expected to offer more detailed answers on library performance. Interviews with library administration offer insight into how standards are made and are being enforced. Library staff interviews will grant an understanding of experiences with neurodiverse patrons and how unique situations are handled. All interviews will offer suggestions for improving neurodiverse services in general.

IV. Project Resources

Personnel

- **SSCC Reference Librarian: Alyssa Donofrio.** Donofrio has five years of experience as the reference librarian at SSCC. She lends a unique perspective to the proposal as she lives with adult ADHD and has insight into the needs of neurodiverse students. Donofrio worked as the primary liaison to Disability Services and worked with Keener to craft survey questions.
- **SSCC Director of Library Services: Sara Hack.** Hack has served as director of the SSCC library for eight years. Her leadership and organizational skills will be paramount in this study. Hack will delegate and supervise the activities of principal investigators while working in tandem with the team.
- **SSCC Archivist: Elizabeth Keener.** Keener has four years of library archival experience and is also diagnosed with ADHD. With Donofrio's input, Keener helped to create survey questions that would resonate with neurodivergent students. Her skills and experience working as a neurodivergent information professional are directly related to this study.
- **SSCC Digital Resource Librarian: Janice Steinhoff.** Steinhoff has seven years of experience. She has been head of research for this study and has been primarily responsible for evaluating sources to conduct the Literature Review that will be used in this project. Steinhoff is also involved in budgeting and justification under Hack's guidance.

- Disability Resources Staff: Staff will identify neurodiverse students with accommodation needs related to ASD, ADHD, or other neurodiversities in order to distribute the survey to relevant participants. Disability Resource Office staff will collect completed surveys, placing them in a lockbox, for principal investigators review
- Part Time Staff: Staff will assist with compiling and collecting data from surveys

Timeline

Month (2023)	Activity	Objective
January- February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Talk to Disability Resource Office for collaboration ● Obtain IRB Approval ● Create and finalize survey and interview questions ● Order equipment necessary for confidential survey. 	Gathering resources to accomplish first step of student surveys.
March-June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create and distribute flyers in the Library, DRO, and around campus. ● School Survey, online and via DRO ● Order thermoses for interviewees ● Create a data sheet with results from interviews. 	Marketing, survey, starting to prepare items for the interviews, collecting data from surveys.
July-August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meeting about school survey. ● Talk about improvements to interview questions ● View staff schedule and start to plan dates/ times for interviews. ● Start interviews if staff is available during the summer. 	Understanding the information from the school survey, seeing if the interviews could use any improvements based on the data from students. Organizing staff schedules for the interviews. Start interviewing.
September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cont. Interviews for fall staff ● If need <u>be</u>: review personnel ● Create a qualitative spreadsheet based on data to look for patterns in interviews. 	Continue interview process, review personnel on project, start to define the data from interviews.
October - December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Qualitative data assessment finalized ● Meeting with Library Administrators and DRO board to assess data ● Finalize decision 	Finalizing all data from the surveys and interviews,

Budget & Justification

The majority of the cost for this proposal will be related to staffing needed to create the surveys and questionnaires, conduct the interviews of the key informants, analysis of the data, and a part time employee to assist with compiling the data. Materials needed for the proposal include computers for use by the investigators (to develop surveys, questionnaires and data analysis), Google Drive survey form, an email account to market the study to potential students and to collect the completed on-line surveys, and materials to print paper surveys, flyers, and posters. Recruiting students through the Disability Resource Office, we will not incur a large cost for marketing as we will try to connect with students via flyers and posters in the Disability Resource Office. For the key informants, participation will be rewarded with a school logo water bottle and refreshments available at the interview site to encourage participation.

Items	Cost	Totals
Part time employee	1/6th of time	\$1,750
Water bottle with school logo for key informant participants	\$115 for a pack of 12 custom water bottles	\$115
Refreshments for interview participants - Dunkin Donuts	\$90	\$90
Surveys (black and white)	200 copies at \$0.20 per copy	\$40
Posters (color)	5 posters \$10 each	\$50
Flyers (color)	40 copies at \$0.50 per copy	\$20
Lock box for completed paper surveys	\$25	\$25
Total cost		\$2,090

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Appendix

Appendix 1:

Neurodiversity Improvement Survey for Students at SSCC

This survey was created to identify what level of comfort our neurodiverse patrons experience in current library settings, to understand what can be done to improve the library resources, and what improvements we could make to represent these patrons and make them feel included and welcomed. We can then take these results and compare them to the SSCC's policy on DEIA and see if our accessibility needs to be improved.

For the purpose of this survey, sensory rooms are spaces within a library which allow students to "alleviate hyperstimulation" or engage in behaviors to help self-regulate, calm, and focus.

(Damian, 2021).

Please complete this user needs analysis survey regarding you and your library experience. All survey answers will be kept confidential and will only be seen by the researchers involved in this study. All questions are also optional and can be skipped. If you have any questions or concerns about the survey before you start, please contact the Disabilities Resource Office at: (XXX) XXX-XXXX.

Sample Demographic Questions:

What is your age? _____

What is your gender? _____

When do you plan to graduate? _____

What is your major? _____

Which Neurodiverse disabilities have you been diagnosed with? _____

Which Neurodiverse disabilities do you think you have but have not been diagnosed for?

Multiple choice questions :

1. Are you comfortable in the SSCC library?
 - Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree

2. Do you think the library at SSCC provides enough resources to help you in your studies?
 - Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree

3. Do you believe the library acknowledges neurodiverse patrons?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

4. Do you think the library staff is capable when it comes to handling any issues and questions you may have?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

5. Does the library often cause sensory overload for you?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

6. Do you need to ask for a study room often to decrease sensory stimuli?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral

- Agree
- Strongly agree

7. Do you use fidget tools and services like ASMR, Calm, and LoFi often?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

8. Do you think the library needs to improve its neurodiverse resources and services?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

9. Do you believe that the introduction of a sensory room with bean bag chairs, LoFi, dim lighting, and a mandatory no talking zone would help you study better?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral

- Agree
- Strongly agree

10. Do you believe this survey will make an impact on services?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Open ended Questions:

1. What improvements do you think could be made to the library place to make it friendlier for neurodiverse patrons?
2. Are there enough study rooms available? Do you feel like they need to be improved? (More rooms, soundproofing, sightlines)
3. How would you feel about the library creating a dedicated sensory room to help neurodiverse students focus?
4. What resources would you like us to have in the sensory room that may help with your concentration? (Fidget toys, bean bag chairs, dim lighting, subscription to Calm, noise canceling headphones, etc.)

5. Do you have any other suggestions to help your library experience?

Online survey form (Through Google Forms):

<https://forms.gle/HGcydCow7YwPDkcU6>

Appendix 2

Key Informant Questions:

All interviewees are told to answer all questions truthfully and assured that they would not be reprimanded for their responses in any way. All answers are confidential and only asked for the sake of collecting data for research purposes alone. They were also told that they could stop the process at any time or abstain from any questions they did not feel comfortable with. Questions are open ended and may naturally lead into other lines of questioning that were not available in the handouts/emails, participants can stop that (and any) line of questioning at any time. Participants received refreshments and a water bottle with the library logo for their participation before the interviews started and these items are not contingent on finishing the interview.

Library Staff:

- 1) Knowledge of Neurodiversity
 - a) What do you think neurodiversity is?
 - b) Do you think you exist on this spectrum?
 - c) Do you have any friends or family on the spectrum?
 - d) How deeply do you understand this topic?
 - e) Do you think any other members of the staff understand this topic well?

- 2) Experience of Staff:
 - a) How long have you worked in libraries?

- b) On average, how many patrons do you get per day?
- c) How many of those patrons do you think are on the neurodivergent spectrum?
- d) If a patron that is on the higher end of the spectrum approaches you, would you understand how to interact with this person?

3) Application to Work

- a) What steps would you take to serve someone who seems nervous to talk to you?
- b) Has something like this ever happened to you? Explain the interaction.
- c) How would you deal with a patron who encounters sensory issues in the library?

4) System Improvements

- a) Do you believe the system needs to focus on neurodiversity more?
- b) What services does the library provide currently?
- c) Is there anything staff can do to increase representation of neurodiverse patrons?
- d) Is there anything management can do to help neurodiverse patrons?
- e) Do you believe there are any resources we can add to aide these patrons?
- f) What do you think about the library adding a sensory room that has bean bag chairs, low lighting, LoFi music, (etc.)
- g) Do you see any issues arising from creating a room like this?

5) Library Rating so far on Interactions with Neurodiverse Patrons

- a) Do you believe that your library holds up to the guidelines that were set in the diversity statement?
- b) What do you think you can do to help with this issue in your position?

Library Administration:

- 1) What definition of neurodiverse does the Administration use as it serves neurodiverse patrons?

- 2) What do you feel can be improved?

- 3) How competent do you believe they are when it comes to handling neurodiverse patrons?

- 4) Have you hired staff that is trained to deal with patrons that are on the spectrum?

- 5) How often do you discuss neurodiverse patrons in meetings?
 - a) Are these patrons kept in mind when ordering items for the library?
 - b) Are these patrons kept in mind when creating programs?
 - c) Do you target this community of patrons during outreach?
 - d) Do you believe enough of the budget is allocated to these patrons?
 - e) What types of representation do they receive?
 - f) Are there any resources (physical and digital) that are bought specifically with them in mind?
 - g) How often do you believe these resources are used?
 - h) What do you think about the library adding a sensory room that has bean bag chairs, low lighting, LoFi music, (etc.)
 - i) Do you see any issues arising from creating a room like this?
 - j) Do you have any suggestions for further improvement when it comes to neurodiverse patrons?
 - k) Have you presented these ideas before, or have they come to your attention during this interview?

l) Do you believe this interview helped your library and will improve the service you provide to neurodiverse patrons?

Member Contribution

Alyssa Donofrio - Editing, APA Citation Formatting, Significance of the Study, Methodology, Research Design

Sara Hack - Thesis, Significance of the Study, Research Goal and Questions, Survey, Methodology, Editing, Research Design

Elizabeth Keener – Formatting, Editing, Methodology, Research Design, Personnel, Survey,

Janice Steinhoff - Needs assessment, Literature review, Editing, Methodology, Research Design, Survey design, Budget, Formatting