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## Supporting Transitions: Cultural Connections for Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Aliza Greenberg  and Sheri Levinsky-Raskin 

### ABSTRACT

Museums are well-positioned to engage adults with autism and other developmental differences both as visitors and employees. This article recounts the Museum Access Consortium's process to design and implement the project Supporting Transitions: Cultural Connections for People with Autism with the goal of calling attention to a large opportunity gap for adults with autism and detailing how museums can be key players in helping to fill this gap. The article shares the project plan, research, resources, insights from the community, and partnership opportunities that led to best practices for museums in serving this audience. The project's participants developed shareable resources to support institutions and staff, generated a guide to career opportunities in the cultural field, and cultivated relationships among museums, service and advocacy organizations, employment specialists, individuals with autism, and parents. This article presents the project's progress, process, lessons learned, best practices discovered, and replicable models and content.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Autism; life skills; job training; employment; museums

### A need and an opportunity

Each year, approximately 50,000 young adults with autism exit school in the United States, leaving them disconnected from community, support services, and structured, daily activities.<sup>1</sup> The need for cultural programs that develop life skills and job training skills to promote financial independence, emotional growth, and connection to the community remain critical for this population. Approximately 84% of adults with developmental disabilities do not have paid jobs in the community that allow them to pursue interests and work alongside typical peers.<sup>2</sup> While it has been common to place individuals in sheltered work environments, paid jobs in the community are now seen as the more favorable option, aligning with developments in employment rights for persons with disabilities.<sup>3</sup> Employment in the community engages individuals with autism in the community and provides meaningful employment, opening an opportunity for museums to include individuals with autism and developmental disabilities as visitors, interns, and employees.

Museums are community hubs, providing structured educational offerings, informal recreational opportunities, and volunteer, internship, and employment opportunities. Many museums are working toward becoming an "Inclusive Museum," an idea put forth by Richard Sandell, suggesting that museums can relieve social exclusion through representation, participation, and access.<sup>4</sup> The social inclusion model has led museums

to the work of diversifying audiences and providing broader physical and intellectual access to museum collections and spaces.<sup>5</sup> However, more recent approaches use an empowerment model that calls on emancipatory research, forging equitable and inclusive relationships with individuals with disabilities and collaborating to co-create experiences. To truly have an inclusive museum, this framework calls on museums to engage in systems-level change by shifting organizational culture, recognizing and changing exclusionary practices, and increasing staff competency.<sup>6</sup>

The Museum Access Consortium (MAC) approaches its work supporting individuals with autism and developmental disabilities with these principles of empowerment, social inclusion, and system-level change as its foundation. MAC operates with the belief that museums are well-positioned to engage this population as visitors and employees. Its Supporting Transitions project serves as a case study in how the museum field can fill a critical need for individuals with autism and developmental disabilities while also working in the pursuit of a more inclusive field.

### **Building an inclusive team**

MAC, headquartered in New York City, is a volunteer-led organization that regularly hosts professional development workshops and offers a network of mutual support to help museum practitioners engage with disability advocates and people who have disabilities. MAC's goal is to provide leadership in creating dialogue, bringing about change, and implementing new processes that address challenges faced by its constituents and stakeholders, which include staff at cultural organizations, individuals with disabilities and their families, and service organizations for those with disabilities. MAC works to strengthen best practices for access and inclusion in cultural facilities of all types in the New York metro area and beyond.

Supporting Transitions: Cultural Connections for People with Autism (Supporting Transitions) began as an extension of a MAC program that aimed to increase opportunities at cultural organizations for school-age children with autism. An outcome of the initial programming was the recognition of the need to support cultural organizations in serving individuals with autism *throughout* their lifespans. MAC sought to extend the project to fill this newly identified need.

In June 2015, with funding from The FAR Fund, Supporting Transitions began a three-year endeavor to increase opportunities for adults with autism at cultural organizations. The FAR Fund brought not only financial support to the project, but also a network of partners knowledgeable about working with adults with autism, committed to advancing the goal of engaging cultural organizations in meeting the needs of this population, and eager to find opportunities for those individuals with autism. The FAR Fund provides support to more than 35 organizations serving the autism community, and MAC serves a global network of 218 cultural organizations.

In January 2016, MAC convened a focus group of individuals with autism at the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum to initiate an investigation into the interests, needs, strengths, and obstacles facing this specific audience as they seek greater involvement in museums and the cultural field. This event provided valuable information that helped to shape the future directions for the project and led to the formation of an advisory group organized around the empowerment model of inclusive practice referenced above.

This advisory group became known as the Supporting Transitions Working Group. It includes autism service organizations and employment specialists, individuals with autism, parents, and representatives from cultural organizations. The group meets twice a year and provides valuable expertise in developing project resources, reaching the target audience, and identifying opportunities and barriers to be addressed by the project. Interestingly, many of the individuals who participated in the initial focus group now participate in the Supporting Transitions Working Group.

The working group has led to many relationships that have been critical to the project and provides a link to the constituents the project seeks to support: a diverse group of individuals with autism engaged in their search for a meaningful future. Through these relationships, MAC makes more resources available to cultural organizations. These resources (relationships with support service organizations, access to job coaching, and online resources on the MAC website) assist museums in the creation of employment, internships, volunteer opportunities, and recreation and life skills programs.

### **A win for adults with autism, a win for museums**

Museums and other cultural organizations are well-positioned to offer adults with autism opportunities for employment and community. The work of arts and cultural organizations requires a wide range of skills, offering individuals with autism multiple entry points to match their strengths with an organization's needs and contribute meaningfully. Individuals with autism have a lot to gain by engaging in the work of museums, as do the museums and other cultural organizations that employ them.

#### ***Opportunities for employment***

As both visitors and members of the cultural workplace, adults with autism demonstrate unique qualities and strengths, such as intense curiosity and deep, specific interests. By using a strengths-based approach to draw on the value-added that individuals with autism bring to the workplace, employers have reported substantial benefits as a result of employing adults with autism.<sup>7</sup> Common strengths that employees with autism bring to workplace include the following:<sup>8</sup>

- Excellent at keeping to routines and systems
- Strong desire to work and contribute
- Very motivated to do a good job
- Highly productive in structured environments
- Lower turnover risk, loyal
- Highly attuned to patterns
- Diverse perspectives
- High enthusiasm

Adults with autism are as diverse as the wider population, and specific strengths and interests vary. Assessing individual strengths is an important first step in the placement process.

## **Opportunities for community**

Many adults with autism want to be a part of the cultural community. One participant in the Museum of Modern Art's Create Ability program said in an interview, "I would like to have a job in a museum, dealing with information and visitor services, giving people information, let's say, where the restrooms are, where certain art exhibits are, where the closest gift shop is."<sup>9</sup> Adults with autism benefit from being a part of a network of like-minded individuals united by a common interest, individuals who share their passions and use their passions to contribute to a larger mission.

For example, the experience of an intern for the New York Transit Museum's Subway Sleuths program demonstrates that having an interest-based work opportunity provides greater purpose. Meredith Martin Gregory, former Special Education and Access Coordinator at the New York Transit Museum, explained:

To see [our intern] excited about work, where his family has said he has never once wanted to do anything with work before ... He will work in class because he has incentives, but in terms of any kinds of internship opportunities, he's just never been interested. So him seeing that work can be associated with your passion has really been amazing for him and for his family.<sup>10</sup>

As many museums and cultural organizations embark on initiatives to diversify their staffs and audiences, it is critical to include disabilities in the definition of diversity and for staff to reflect the diversity of the individuals they serve. Katie Fanning, Coordinator of Guest Services and Accessibility at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, in an interview with MAC, described the impact of training individuals with developmental disabilities to be Access Ambassadors, the public-facing volunteer representatives for their programs. "With the Passport program, it allows our families, as they come to performances, to see sometimes older versions of their children ... Our Access Ambassadors are definitely modeling behavior for the younger children who are coming, which is pretty magical" (Figure 1).

As museums seek to increase the diversity of their visitors to include more individuals with disabilities, they should also take care to increase those with disabilities among their staff, especially in leadership and public-facing positions. In 2010, the American Alliance of Museums' (then called the American Association of Museums) Center for the Future of Museums published a report on the demographic transformation of museums and reported that only 20% of museum employees were cultural minorities. The report called to address this problem by stating, "We need to tackle this problem at all stages – increase awareness of museum careers, recruit more diverse students into museum studies programs, and look outside traditional training programs for bright, interested people and then invest in their continued education."<sup>11</sup> The statistics in this report did not mention individuals with disabilities as part of the demographics studied, yet MAC argues that the same issues exist for the disability community and similar action should be taken.

## **A plan in action**

Supporting Transitions is a three-year project. Each year's goals build on the progress of the previous year. The project's plan is designed to generate a set of best practices from across organizations that will be disseminated to the field in order to promote further



**Figure 1.** The access ambassadors at Lincoln center for the performing arts assist audience members on Lincoln center's campus. Photo Credit: Nathan Lin.

expansion of the work and support organizations in embarking on initiatives that increase opportunities for adults with autism in their institutions.

### ***Year one: understanding interest and opportunity***

During the first year, MAC engaged in a fact-finding endeavor to determine the landscape for adults with autism at cultural organizations. MAC conducted a survey of cultural organizations in the New York metropolitan area to gauge existing opportunities and interest in serving the population and to better understand comfort level and knowledge of museum staff in regard to autism and developmental disabilities.<sup>12</sup>

The survey revealed that 52% of cultural organizations participating in the survey were interested in serving adults with autism in the next year. Of the participating cultural organizations, 72% already held recreation programs that offered art making or art appreciation activities aimed at building community and providing leisure activity for the participants. However, only 16% offered programs that had a life skills or transition component, a highly desired focus for this population. The survey findings also showed



that existing opportunities for people with autism to contribute to an organization's operation were largely volunteer-based, with very few employment openings.

That same year MAC held the focus group for individuals with autism interested in cultural careers. Twelve individuals with autism attended this meeting. One focus group participant shared, "I think if an institution gets on board and hires people with autism, it shows that they realize that art should be open for all." Employment was a major interest among the participants.

Armed with a coherent view of the landscape from the survey, the focus group, and the working group, MAC developed a plan to achieve the goals of the Supporting Transitions project. MAC first organized a professional development event for representatives from cultural organizations to observe varied models for engaging adults with autism at museums. Models for engagement were presented by several organizations:

- The Jewish Museum spoke about transitioning a school program for children with autism to a program for adults with autism, with a focus on building museum visitors.
- The New York Transit Museum shared its experience creating a position for an individual with autism in its education department.
- The Museum of Modern Art outlined how its program, Create Ability, focuses on building community among participants through experiences in the studio and in the galleries (Figures 2 and 3).

The event featured introductions by members of the JCC Manhattan's Adaptations program, a community of adults in their 20s and 30s with developmental or learning disabilities. A program transcript, audio excerpts, and slide presentation with accessibility notes are available on the MAC website.<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 2.** The New York Transit Museum's part time inventory associate sorts and prepares materials for education workshops at the museum. Photo Credit: Meredith Martin Gregory.



**Figure 3.** Two participants in the Museum of modern art's create ability program work on an art-making activity. Photo Credit: Bren Bater.

Additionally, the Supporting Transitions staff, made up of a project leader and a project manager, created an internship opportunity specifically for an individual on the autism spectrum to support the second year of the project. Several members of the working group – representatives from autism support organizations, specifically employment specialists – were engaged to help in hiring the right intern, a participant in MAC's focus group of individuals with autism. The JCC Manhattan's Adaptations program supported the project intern through job coaching and collaborated with MAC in the design of the internship experience.

### ***Year two: exploring and sharing models***

Year two of the project focused on documenting and disseminating more models for engaging adults with autism at museums and cultural organizations and beginning to cultivate new opportunities. MAC prepared a series of case studies documenting the details, practices, successes, and lessons learned from cultural organizations that work with adults with autism throughout New York City. Through interviews, observations, and research, the case studies revealed larger themes and best practices to be shared with the field. Case studies were completed for El Museo del Barrio, the New York Transit Museum, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and CO/LAB Theater Group. Examples from the case studies include the following:

- El Museo del Barrio's internship program, a partnership with the New York City Autism Charter School, brings students to the museum once a week as interns and exposes them to all areas of the museum. Building on tips for successful museum internships, as noted in the American Association for State and Local History's blog *Interns 101*, internship opportunities such as this encourage interns to share ideas,



provide opportunities for them to take responsibility for projects, and support them and provide feedback and guidance in a real-world work environment.<sup>14</sup>

- The Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts is also training young people in partnership with schools in New York City. This case study follows the Access Ambassador program, a job training and performing arts awareness initiative for high school students with disabilities. The program trains teens with autism and other developmental disabilities to be ambassadors at Lincoln Center. Ambassador duties include greeting guests, providing directions, and assisting with any additional tasks to make visitors feel welcome. In addition to training in customer service, communication, and teamwork, Lincoln Center also provides training in job readiness skills through career information sessions and mock interviews, reflecting best practices shared in resources developed by the American Association for Museum Volunteers.<sup>15</sup>
- The New York Transit Museum pioneered an employment opportunity designed specifically for someone with autism. The case study follows this position but also the varied programs the museum offers for adults with developmental disabilities. Following the popularity of the Subway Sleuths after-school program for school age children with developmental disabilities, the museum developed an internship opportunity for an alumnus of the program, providing an important role model for the participants in the program. The museum also offers recreational programming for adults with developmental disabilities in the form of Day Habilitation Days. And the museum runs a life skills development program called Ready to Ride, which provides travel training to individuals with developmental disabilities. Its comprehensive programs laid the groundwork for employing its first individual on the autism spectrum.

MAC is also developing case studies for the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum, the JCC Manhattan, and the Museum of Modern Art, other organizations that provide varied programming for adults with developmental disabilities.

As MAC developed these case studies, it simultaneously put significant effort toward forging new recreation programs, internships and job development programs, and employment opportunities at museums. These efforts provided necessary support to cultural organizations and critical support to individuals with developmental disabilities in the form of education about the cultural field.

For instance, MAC developed and conducted a Cultural Careers Learning event to connect individuals with autism with representatives from cultural organizations. The event was designed to introduce participants to possible jobs within cultural organizations, the skills necessary to perform those jobs, and the pathways individuals took to acquire those jobs. Six representatives from museums and other cultural organizations spoke on a panel about how they entered the cultural workforce, the training required, application and interview advice, and information about organizational culture. Fourteen representatives participated in small group discussions about their jobs and their organizations to provide more focused conversation with individuals with autism and other developmental differences and answer their specific questions about the cultural workforce. Over 80 people attended the event, including adults with autism, employment specialists/job coaches, and parents. One attendee wrote of the event, “It gave me a clearer understanding of the job I want to do.”

### ***Year three: learning in action***

The project is currently entering its third year. Following the Cultural Careers Learning event, MAC is now working with museums and other cultural organizations to develop internships at museums for individuals with autism and other developmental differences. MAC will offer resources, mentorship, connections, and support as organizations embark on creating these new opportunities. To this end, MAC held an Inclusive Hiring Forum in June 2017 to engage human resources professionals and those involved in managing diversity initiatives. MAC will also work with cultural organizations and autism support organizations in order to forge new recreation and life skills opportunities, connecting these two groups so that individuals with autism can benefit from all that museums have to offer.

### **Progress, impact, and lessons learned**

MAC continues to learn from its partners to improve the Supporting Transitions project and make lasting progress in the field. Here are some things learned along the way:

#### ***Adopting a two-pronged approach***

It was clear from the fact-finding process in year one that employment needed to be a critical focus of the Supporting Transitions project. This was the main point of interest for individuals on the autism spectrum in the focus group, parents, and autism support organizations. However, through subsequent investigations, discussions, and interactions with stakeholders, MAC discovered that in order to build a pipeline to employment, recreation and life skills development programs at museums and cultural organizations were crucial. While these programs exist for school age children, they are still rare for adults with autism.

Both the Museum of Modern Art and the Jewish Museum offer recreation programs for this audience that mix art-making and gallery experiences. Programs like these provide supported opportunities for adults with autism to build community, engage as museum visitors, and become comfortable in the museum environment. Life skills development programs, such as the Ready to Ride program at the New York Transit Museum, use the museum's collection as an educational entry point for teaching individuals valuable life skills, like travel training and using public transportation in New York City.

Recreation and life skills development programs like these lay the groundwork for future internship and employment opportunities for adults with autism. By meaningfully engaging individuals with autism as visitors first, museums invest in staff training that prioritizes a culture of accessibility and creates allies among the staff. MAC is moving forward with a two-pronged approach – working to create pilot internships as stepping stones to employment *and* developing new programs with a recreation and life skills focus.

#### ***Documenting and sharing best practices***

MAC is also documenting its progress, information, and lessons learned in the form of online resources available on its website, including the case studies mentioned above.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the project, MAC will also host a symposium to offer professional

development to cultural organizations and share compiled best practices for museums as they create recreation and life skills programs, internship programs, and employment opportunities. These best practices include but are not limited to the following:

- Partner with existing organizations serving students and adults in transition
- Offer staff trainings and opportunities for other departments to get involved
- Establish a routine and then build on it
- Use strong visual aids to help participants process new information
- Capitalize on program participants' interests to offer engaging volunteer, internship, or job opportunities
- View difference as a positive

### ***Deeper engagement over time***

MAC's case studies revealed that museums begin many new programs by deepening work with established audiences. Once the museums profited had invested the time and energy into developing *one* program for adults with autism, they found they had the capacity to do more. This suggests that a key step in creating more inclusive museums for adults with autism – as visitors and/or employees – is to support museums in their initial work to engage this audience. Working with adults with developmental disabilities in museum programs provides opportunities for staff to gain more knowledge and comfort with this population, preparing them, in the long run, to engage with individuals with autism and developmental disabilities as interns and employees.

The Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum is another example of a museum deepening its engagement with this audience over time. The museum has been hosting weekend recreation programs for adults with developmental disabilities since 2013. In 2016 the museum began a placement partnership with Birch Family Services' New Frontier Program to provide paid part-time internships at the museum for adults with autism and other developmental differences. With support from The FAR Fund, Birch Family Services staff helped museum staff set up systems and practices of supervision and job coaching for two individuals in their jobs at the Intrepid Museum. Coaching included creating schedules to assist the interns in their daily work, a document with reminders to help the interns navigate the museum, and conversations with a job coach about different challenges the interns may face on the job. Marvin, a Birch Family Services client placed as an intern with the Intrepid Museum's Education Department, proudly described the value he brings to the team, noting, "My job is to keep the place organized so the educators can teach the children who visit."<sup>17</sup>

### **Supporting an inclusive museum**

Forming partnerships and engaging departments across cultural organizations (accessibility and education departments, human resources, management, visitor services), the Supporting Transitions project has grown into a robust initiative that can be replicated in different cities, supporting efforts throughout the country to make museums more inclusive spaces. Shirlee Taylor, Executive Director for The FAR Fund, noted that "MAC has

continued to identify the greatest need and took the next step of looking at employment opportunities at cultural institutions for those with disabilities, an area of very high need. From this, The FAR Fund has established five part-time paid internships at NYC cultural institutions for individuals with [autism].”

The need for increased opportunities for adults with autism is widespread. Museums present a unique opportunity to fill this need while engaging adults with autism in their interests and passions. Using the Supporting Transitions project as a model, museums seeking to increase opportunities for adults with autism can consider these action steps:

- Partner with a service organization to host an event welcoming visitors with autism and other developmental disabilities to the museum
- Work with a job coach to create an internship for an individual with autism or another developmental disability
- Connect with a high school or transition program that serves individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities to create opportunities for these individuals in the museum
- Create an advisory board of individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities and their families to advise on the creation of new, inclusive programs
- Invite an individual with a developmental disability to serve on the museum’s board
- Form a coalition of museums working toward inclusivity or seek out an existing network in the geographic area in order to share practice, observe programs, and exchange resources

The work of MAC and the Supporting Transitions project has created a community of stakeholders dedicated to increasing cultural opportunities for adults with autism; a network of cultural representatives, autism support professionals, parents, and individuals with autism working together to address the need for greater community, engagement, and employment for adults with autism and other developmental differences; and a host of tools and resources to support museums in empowering individuals with autism and creating more inclusive organizations.<sup>18</sup> MAC continues to develop resources, programs, and professional development, available to museums that endeavor to meet this critical need.

## Notes

1. Roux et al., *National Autism Indicators Report*, 8.
2. National Core Indicators, *Featured Core Indicators*.
3. Hoffman, “An Employment Opportunity or a Discrimination Dilemma?” 29.
4. Sandell, “Museums as Agents of Social Inclusion,” 401–18.
5. Taylor, “From Systemic Exclusion to Systemic Inclusion,” 155–62.
6. Hollins, “Reciprocity, Accountability, Empowerment,” 228–43.
7. Hendricks, “Employment and Adults,” 125–34, doi:10.3233/JVR-2010-0502.
8. Shore, “Strengths and Challenges.”
9. “Building Community at the Museum of Modern Art,” Museum Access Consortium, August 28, 2017. <http://museumaccessconsortium.org/resource/supporting-transitions-cultural-connections-adults-autism/>.
10. “Case Study: The New York Transit Museum’s Ready to Ride Program, Day Habilitation Day, and Subway Sleuths Internship,” Museum Access Consortium, August 28, 2017.

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11. Farrell et al., *Demographic Transformation*, 30.
12. “Cultural Organization Survey for Organizations Serving Adults with Autism,” Museum Access Consortium, August 28, 2017. <https://form.jotform.com/61427785607161>.
13. “Supporting Transitions: Cultural Connections for Adults with Autism,” Museum Access Consortium, May 24, 2016, <http://museumaccessconsortium.org/resource/workshop-documentation-supporting-transitions-cultural-connections-adults-autism/>.
14. Baker, “Interns 101.”
15. “Embracing the Power of College Interns as Volunteers,” American Association for Museum Volunteers, May 26, 2016, <https://aamv.wildapricot.org/College-Students-as-Interns>.
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