

## “LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL, AND THERE ARE OTHER NEURODIVERGENT PEOPLE OUT THERE TOO”: A STRENGTHS-BASED ARTS PROGRAM FOR AUTISTIC YOUTH

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### Abstract

This program evaluation examined outcomes of a program called The Fellowship, designed for autistic youth and young adults ages 15-39 and implemented across six rural and mid-sized Wisconsin communities. The Fellowship integrates interest-driven creative activities, peer discussion, and reflection, grounded in Positive Youth Development and the OT framework of doing, being, belonging, + becoming. Fifty-four participants engaged in the six-month program. The authors used thematic analysis of weekly online post-session reflections to assess program impact. The authors identified five themes: Belonging and Community-Building, Artistic Process and Perseverance, Artistic Self-Efficacy, Self-Discovery, and Program Enjoyment. Participants frequently reported increased confidence, connection, and a sense of identity through creative expression. The authors identified creative agency and consistent community support as key facilitators in these outcomes. Findings indicated that The Fellowship fosters critical developmental outcomes for autistic youth and young adults, including improved self-confidence, social connection, and a sense of identity, which are essential for successful transitions to adulthood and community belonging. These results suggest practical implications for professionals working with autistic youth, highlighting the value of integrating creative, strengths-based, and community-centered approaches. Further research of long-term outcomes is needed to understand the broader applicability of this approach across various populations and settings.

Keywords: Autism, Neurodivergent, Belonging, Community Participation, Social Interaction, Art, Community-Based

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## **Introduction**

The prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has increased over the last two decades, attributed to changes in diagnostic criteria, improved diagnostic and screening tests, expanded access to resources, and increased public awareness (Hirota & King, 2023; Maenner et al., 2023). During 2020-2022, ASD was diagnosed in 3.4% of U.S. children ages 3 to 17 (CDC, 2024; Maenner et al., 2023). The criteria of ASD diagnoses are predominantly deficit-based in areas of relationships and communication (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Lord et al., 2020). Some autistic individuals advocate for understanding ASD as a neurological difference instead of categorizing it as a disorder, favoring a non-medicalized stance (Garcia, 2021; Petty & Ellis, 2024). This paper uses identity-first language, challenging conventional views by framing ASD as an integral part of personal identity rather than a disorder to be cured (Garcia, 2021; Kenny et al., 2016; D. E. M. Milton, 2012; Petty & Ellis, 2024).

## **Background**

### ***Gaps in Autism Transition Services***

Differences in social communication and interpersonal skills often affect an autistic individual's transition from adolescence to adulthood. This transition period is a critical time for autistic individuals who need the social competency and self-regulatory skills necessary for identity formation and employment (Dean et al., 2022). Social competencies refer to skills for successful social interactions, including communication, understanding social norms, perspective-taking, emotional regulation, and adaptive behavior in social contexts (Corbett et al., 2016). However, autistic youth and young adults often lack access to effective social competency and vocational resources, which hampers their transition to valuable post-secondary occupations, such as employment and community socialization, impacting their quality of life (Hughes et al., 2023; Wisconsin Office of the Commissioner of Insurance, 2024). The fourth edition of the *Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process (OTPF-4)* is an official framework outlining the core constructs that describe and guide contemporary

occupational therapy (OT) practice. Within the *OTPF-4*, social interaction skills are noted as essential performance skills for interpersonal engagement across occupational domains (“Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process,” 2020). A recently published cohort study by Hughes and colleagues (2023) identified gaps and disparities in school-based postsecondary transition planning for autistic youth and young adults. Of the 322 participants in the study, only 24% had received social skills instruction and only 28% had received mental health services, despite more than 60% having one or more coexisting mental health diagnoses (Hughes et al., 2023). Research indicates that social connections, including giving and receiving support and volunteering, contribute to improved mental and physical health, increased longevity, and a greater sense of belonging and significance (Hammell, 2014).

With deficient school-based services, caregivers often struggle with motivating autistic youth and young adults to pursue postsecondary opportunities (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015). Although some have goals for postsecondary transition and/or employment, those who struggle with these goals may be unsure of how to accomplish them and reluctant to talk with caregivers (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015). The lack of individualized services is particularly apparent in rural and mid-sized communities, which may exacerbate employment disparities for autistic youth and young adults living in these areas (Antezana et al., 2017; Scarpa et al., 2020). The gap in social competency and vocational services for this population is associated with remarkably high unemployment rates (Leigh & Du, 2015). The estimated unemployment rate among autistic adults in the U.S. is 83%, the impact of which is projected to involve direct medical, non-medical, and productivity costs of \$461B in 2025 (Leigh & Du, 2015). Lack of employment also negatively impacts social relationships and integration into the community (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). ASD research has predominantly concentrated on biological aspects, leaving areas such as community-based interventions for autistic individuals underexplored (Pellicano et al., 2022).

### ***Islands of Brilliance***

To address these challenges, Islands of Brilliance (IOB), a nonprofit organization based in Wisconsin, US, designed a program to help autistic youth and young adults increase community engagement through positive social connections, identity affirmation, and a sense of belonging. The organization works in interdisciplinary teams of educators, artists, and occupational therapists to develop creativity and digital arts-based programs. Utilizing a strengths-based approach, these programs foster self-esteem, interpersonal skills, self-advocacy, and community building (Holt et al., 2025). Research indicates that strengths-based programs are linked to improved mental health outcomes, increased self-advocacy, enhanced learning, and greater engagement (Murthi et al., 2023). Through interest-driven emphasis, IOB provides spaces for autistic youth and young adults to feel educationally and socially supported, increasing the potential for engagement across home, school, work, and community settings. Each program offered by IOB aims to create safe spaces that foster community, with social connection serving as the primary mechanism for participants to achieve this. Moreover, Hammell (2014) highlights that engaging in an occupation with others enables a sense of belonging, which in turn facilitates connection (Hammell, 2014). IOB chose art as its program focus due to its universality in facilitating self-exploration and expression for autistic individuals, regardless of their speaking abilities or communication differences. IOB values align with the premise that creativity is not exclusive to exceptional individuals; it is an exceptional attribute in everyone (Carter, 2015).

Islands of Brilliance has established relationships with community-based and state-wide organizations, local artists, and educators across Wisconsin. Through those relationships, they recognized the need for strengths-based and identity-affirming social programs for autistic youth and young adults in rural and mid-sized communities. Therefore, they designed The Fellowship led by local educators and artists, for these individuals to engage in arts-based, technology-based, and graphic design activities, accompanied by guided discussions, to develop social competencies and community engagement—building blocks for citizenship and vocational readiness. This program

evaluation aims to assess The Fellowship's outcomes by analyzing weekly post-session participant reflections. Although this paper presents a program evaluation rather than a research study, the authors adhered to the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) (O'Brien et al., 2014).

## **Methods**

### ***Program Evaluation Design***

This qualitative program evaluation used a systematic yet flexible analytic approach (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) to explore participant reflections in their own words. The analytic approach provided structure for organizing and comparing data across participants and program sites, ensuring transparency and consistency in the process. Within this framework, the immersion-crystallization process guided the qualitative analysis, enabling investigators to immerse themselves in participant reflections, pause to reflect on emerging insights, and iteratively crystallize patterns and themes through cycles of deep engagement and interpretive review (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

This combined approach supported both rigor and responsiveness to the context of participant experience, allowing insights to emerge naturally from the data rather than from predefined categories. Throughout the process, investigators engaged in reflexive practice—acknowledging assumptions, documenting interpretive decisions, and remaining open to new perspectives.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

This program evaluation was determined to be exempt from IRB review; however, all activities adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants. Participants provided verbal consent after being informed about how their journal reflections would be used and that their anonymity would be protected. Participation was voluntary, and individuals could withdraw from the program at any time without penalty or consequences. For participants who were legal minors, parents were notified

about the program components, including the evaluation, upon program registration, and parental assent was obtained before program participation.

### ***The Fellowship Description***

The Fellowship was provided in six locations across rural and mid-sized Wisconsin communities, where up to 10 participants met at their local library or an art-based organization. Communities were selected based on the expressed interests and resource needs of potential participants, caregivers, and community collaborators. The program was designed to be embedded in communities and delivered by local artists and educators, with the aim of improving social opportunities and community engagement, as well as filling a gap in school- and community-based programs to support postsecondary transitions (Holt et al., 2025). Within each community, local artists and educators were trained to facilitate The Fellowship using a train-the-trainer, manualized approach via monthly curricular meetings, which promoted program fidelity. Facilitators had the flexibility to apply content responsive to the community and participants' culture, goals, and needs.

Participants met weekly for six months to engage in digital arts, graphic design, and hands-on creative activities. In each one-hour session, they completed thematic creative projects using graphic design software on iPads and hands-on methods. During individual and paired work as well as large-group discussions, they also partnered with peers to build relationships, foster a sense of community, and establish a social network. The partnership approach provided supportive opportunities for making social connections among individuals and groups.

### ***The Fellowship Curriculum Structure***

The curriculum followed a diversity of design principles for autistic participants by offering choices in creative mediums and approaches, incorporating sensory-friendly work environments, and providing facilitators with flexible options to grade activities through extension tasks and adjusted work time as needed (Burgstahler & Russo-Gleicher, 2015; Carrington et al., 2020; D. Milton et al., 2016). The curriculum

employed backward design principles, beginning with clear goals grounded in the overarching program framework, to foster topic-based creative exploration through art, technology, and graphic design projects, culminating in insight-sharing through large-group discussions within a supportive peer network. Each month, the curriculum focused on one of the themes found within the Five Cs Model of Positive Youth Development, i.e., Competence, Confidence, Character, Caring, Connection, and Contribution (Hershberg et al., 2014; Lerner et al., 2002, 2011; Lerner & Lerner, 2013). Each session had a consistent progression as outlined in Table 2.

### ***Theoretical Foundation***

The Fellowship is centered on Wilcock's (1998) Doing, Being, and Becoming OT framework, with the addition of Belonging, as described in more recent adaptations of the framework (Hammell, 2014). Using this framework as a guide, The Fellowship engages participants in creative activities (doing) to honor and explore their true selves, interests, and values (being). The program's activities and discussions aim to unite participants in the community through shared activities and experiences (belonging) and to enable personal growth (becoming) (Hammell, 2014; Wilcock, 1998).

The Five Cs Model of Positive Youth Development (PYD) and its recent evolution into the Six Cs Model (Lerner et al., 2002, 2011; Lerner & Lerner, 2013) are research-based frameworks grounded in Developmental Systems Theory (Ford & Lerner, 1992). This theory emphasizes that an individual's bio-psycho-social-behavioral elements develop through interactions with their environment. In the Five Cs Model, adolescent growth is seen as a dynamic process in which thriving is reflected in those five key areas, progressing toward the emergence of a sixth C: Contribution (Lerner et al., 2002, 2011; Lerner & Lerner, 2013). See Figure 1 and Table 1.

**Figure 1.** *The Five Cs Model of Positive Youth Development, Plus the Sixth C*



**Table 1.** *The Five Cs Model of Positive Youth Development, Plus the Sixth C*

Cs	Description
Competence	Refers to a positive perception of one’s social, academic, cognitive, and vocational abilities.
Confidence	Refers to an internal sense of self-worth and self-efficacy.
Connection	Encompasses positive, reciprocal relationships with peers, family, and community.
Character	Involves adherence to cultural and societal norms, a sense of morality, and integrity.
Caring/Compassion	Reflects empathy and sympathy for others.
Contribution	Constitutes the sixth C, which is the application of one’s skills and talents to support personal development and benefit the community.

Sources: Burkhard et al., 2020; Hershberg et al., 2014; Lerner et al., 2002; Lerner & Lerner, 2013.

As these elements grow, they collectively foster well-rounded, thriving youth. These key areas align with a strengths-based approach to programming for autistic youth and build on extant research evaluating digital arts programs (Bowers et al., 2010; Lee, Milbourn, et al., 2024). Table 2 summarizes The Fellowship's overview.

**Table 2. Overview of The Fellowship**

Topic	Description
Underlying Principles	Five Cs Model of Positive Youth Development Doing, Being, Becoming + Belonging OT framework Universal Design principles for autistics Creative exploration
Program Targets	Social competence Community engagement Resiliency Self-advocacy skills Affirm personal and social identity Positive social connections and belonging
Structure	2 to 10 autistic adolescent and young adult participants 60 minutes 20 weekly sessions facilitated by an artist and educator trained as Brilliant Fellows.
Content	(1) Stoke: Activity or game to start the session. (2) Creative mission: Project focus for the session. (3) Creative work time: Project-based creative exploration of the monthly theme. (4) Shareout: Participants take pictures of their creations and celebrate their art as a group. (5) Guided discussion: Discuss session activities and connection to lived-experiences. (6) Reflection: Participants reflect by answering the following prompts: What joy did you experience today? What challenge did you experience today? What discovery did you make today?

### ***Participants***

Autistic youth and young adults living in or near one of The Fellowship’s community-based locations were invited to participate in the program, which took place from February to September 2024. The first author recruited participants through local community and school-based networks, such as Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (2023), which promote collaboration and resource sharing among schools and the state. The 54 participants were ages 15 to 39 years ( $SD = 5.08$  years).

### **Data Collection**

Data collected included participants' online reflections after each weekly session, in which they answered prompts about the joy they experienced that day and one challenge they encountered. Other prompts were guided by something they discovered that day. All responses were imported into the database in their original form.

### **Data Analysis**

The authors followed the methods of Crabtree and Miller (1999), including immersion-crystallization and constant comparison techniques, to analyze the data and identify themes in the reflection journals. The data were first analyzed by site and then across sites. Inductive coding was employed to highlight participants' critical insights. The authors conducted an initial analysis and built a set of codes. After the initial set of codes was developed, the authors met to refine the codebook by comparing, categorizing, and discussing the categories, their properties, and their dimensions. During this phase, the authors finalized the coding scheme and definitions, re-analyzed the data (double-coding at least 25%) and resolved any discrepancies through consensus to ensure reliability. To ensure the data's trustworthiness, the team engaged in debriefing, reflexive journaling, and member checking (Cohen et al., 2022).

### **Results**

Data analysis of the experiences of participants in The Fellowship identified five themes across the three reflection prompts: Belonging and Community-Building, Artistic Process and Perseverance, Artistic Self-Efficacy, Self-Discovery, and Program Enjoyment. In this program evaluation, belonging and community-building were defined as a sense of belonging, which refers to the need for others' acceptance, connectedness, and respect to build relationships and community (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992, 2002). The artistic process and perseverance theme was defined as the sequence of steps or activities an artist undertakes to create art. The artistic process is as much about exploration and growth as it is about producing a final piece (Lichtzier & Peters, 2017). Artistic self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in

their ability to perform and achieve desired outcomes in artistic endeavors successfully. It encompasses confidence in one's creative skills, problem-solving abilities, and capacity to overcome challenges within the artistic process (Bandura, 1994; Tierney & Farmer, 2002, 2011). The self-discovery theme is defined as gaining a deeper understanding of one's identity, including thoughts, emotions, values, beliefs, strengths, weaknesses, and purpose, and how these aspects relate to the world (Torres et al., 2009). Finally, the program enjoyment theme represented a participant's overall pleasure, satisfaction, or positive emotional experience from participating in The Fellowship or activities.

Table 3 presents the five themes, definitions, and exemplar quotes based on the prompts. Program Enjoyment was the only theme without a quote represented in all three prompts; there was no response to the prompt, *"What challenges did you experience today?"* The representative quotes are original data extracted from all program sites.

<b>Table 3. Themes, Reflective Prompts, and Representative Quotes from Participants</b>	
<b>Theme and Definition</b>	<b>Reflection Prompts and Representative Quotes</b>
<b>Belonging and Community-Building</b>	<p><b>JOY:</b> "Meeting other people with autism." / "I liked networking with new, cool people." / "It is nice to know that like-minded people are out there."</p> <p><b>CHALLENGE:</b> "Breaking the ice with new people you hadn't met prior." / "Talking to new people." / "Talking out loud with the group."</p> <p><b>DISCOVERY:</b> "Discovering how my talents and positive traits can benefit my community." / "Life is beautiful, and there are other neurodivergent people out there too." / "I discovered that I'm not alone in this world."</p>
<b>Artistic Process and Perseverance</b>	<p><b>JOY:</b> "Thinking of how to create my own gallery." / "I experienced the coolest thing about this app." / "Learning the different visual worlds, thinking of a picture in my head."</p> <p><b>CHALLENGE:</b> "I couldn't figure out how to get the background in the carpet." / "Using an iPad to record my stunt double and my movie." / "Trying to be creative in less time."</p> <p><b>DISCOVERY:</b> "It's fun to use mixed mediums by taking pictures of our aliens &amp; adding them to Procreate." / "I've discovered some new ideas for my planet project that the teacher showed and told us." / "I've discovered that my planet and its resources and temperature and plants and animals that I've finish looks great that I did."</p>

<p><b>Artistic Self-Efficacy</b></p>	<p>JOY: “I’ve experienced that I’ve finished my gallery and it looks good.” / “I came up with some good ideas brainstorming.”                  CHALLENGE: “I’m not easily challenged.”                  DISCOVERY: “I’ve discovered that I’m getting good at drawing in Procreate from the iPad.” / “With some guidance, I was able to draw a heart on my dress. I was able to draw it and color it myself.” / “I discovered I’m a good cinematography artist.”</p>
<p><b>Self-Discovery</b></p>	<p>JOY: “Being able to stick to one thing.” / “Getting to write things in a language I made.” / “Getting to know my hobbies and experiences.”                  CHALLENGE: “Being able to let go given this week’s struggles.” / “We changed rooms, and I hate that.”                  DISCOVERY: “Knowing my own superhero powers.” / “Stunts, characters, reflections, and knowing about myself.”</p>
<p><b>Program Enjoyment</b></p>	<p>JOY: “Being here.” / “(The session) was good and calm.” / “I’m really glad that I decided to try this out because I really enjoyed it.”                  CHALLENGE: None coded.                  DISCOVERY: “Games are fun!” / “Prompts are fun.” / “Drawing an avatar is both interesting and fun.”</p>

Participants were free to create within the session’s focal areas throughout the program. Artistic freedom facilitated the artistic process as a journey of exploration, growth, and perseverance, requiring creativity and resilience. Participants engaged deeply with artistic creation, experimenting with new tools like Procreate®, a digital drawing application for the iPad, and envisioning their galleries. They found joy in learning different visual techniques, designing meaningful projects such as album covers and shoes for a cause, and bringing imagined worlds to life. However, challenges emerged, from technical difficulties, such as integrating backgrounds and recording stunt doubles, to the creative struggle of generating new ideas under time constraints. Despite these obstacles, participants demonstrated strong artistic self-efficacy, gaining confidence in their abilities through hands-on experience and problem-solving. They celebrated their progress, recognizing their skills in cinematography, digital art, and mixed media. Discoveries along the way, such as successfully designing planets, keychains, and film sets, reinforced their belief in their creative potential. This process of trial, adaptation, and achievement highlights the essential role of perseverance in artistic growth, empowering individuals to embrace challenges and trust in their artistic capabilities.

The authors collected data through participants' reflections, using open-ended prompts, as part of this program. The reflection process served as both an assessment and a programmatic element, allowing participants to synthesize their thoughts and emotions at the end of each session. By embedding data collection within the program's natural structure, data could be collected without interrupting session flow. Embedding data collection also enabled high participation and allowed participants' words to become part of the data.

## **Discussion**

For autistic youth and young adults, acquiring critical life skills translates to successful employment and increased engagement across settings (Scott et al., 2019). The evaluation revealed that participants responded positively to The Fellowship program, and that it fostered their creative confidence and enhanced their social and artistic self-efficacy. These outcomes suggest an increased sense of belonging, community, and self-discovery among participants, who enjoyed the Fellowship sessions, especially the relationship-building and creative components (e.g., games, drawing, and learning digital illustration applications). Their reflections insight into how program participation impacted them inwardly and outwardly. Through these themes, we discovered an overarching sense of increased social and artistic confidence surrounding these social encounters and the program's acceptability.

A strong sense of belonging and community-building drove the program's success. This finding further strengthens the importance of using shared engagement in meaningful activities to facilitate connection and belonging among autistic youth and young adults (Hammell, 2014). Participants consistently highlighted the joy of connecting with like-minded individuals and recognizing how their talents could contribute to their community. Milton and Sims (2016) reported similar findings in their exploratory study on well-being and social belonging, which analyzed journal submissions from autistic adults. Their research emphasized that opportunities for connection, shared

experiences, and the development of positive relationships were fundamental to well-being. They concluded that efforts should focus on fostering connections among autistic individuals rather than attempting to remediate social differences. Additionally, they advocated for programs that prioritize personal interests and individual perspectives over normative social expectations (Milton & Sims, 2016). By participating in art activities, individuals in The Fellowship engaged in their communities, and for some, The Fellowship provided their first opportunity to form friendships.

In their journal reflections, participants described a sense of self-discovery, a transformative process that facilitated their understanding of their identity, strengths, and place in the world. Participants reflected on moments of joy in uncovering their passions, such as developing a new language and exploring their hobbies and experiences. However, self-discovery came with challenges, including adapting to changes in their environment and overcoming struggles. Despite these obstacles, participants made meaningful discoveries about themselves, recognizing their unique abilities, superhero-like strengths, and creative potential. Engaging in artistic and reflective activities gave them insight into their character, talents, and resilience, further shaping their evolving sense of self. These findings are consistent with existing strengths- and arts-based ASD interventions, showing that artistic freedom promotes engagement, belonging, and well-being (Lee et al., 2020; Lee, Milbourn, et al., 2024; Lee, Scott, et al., 2024).

Facilitator support was critical in fostering self-discovery, ensuring that participants were actively supported without imposing creative expectations. This approach aligns with research by Bigby, Bould, and colleagues who identified activity support as a person-centered method for promoting meaningful engagement and relationships among individuals with disabilities; studies utilizing this approach have demonstrated increased engagement, enhanced community involvement, greater self-determination, and improved mental health outcomes (Bigby, Bould, Iacono, & Beadle-Brown, 2020; Bigby, Bould, Iacono, Kavanagh, et al., 2020; Bould et al., 2016, 2019; Iacono et al., 2019).

### ***Implications for Professional Practice***

The themes identified in the program evaluation demonstrate the importance of a curriculum focused on the Six Cs of the PYD model (Lerner & Lerner, 2013), which helps develop participants' creative confidence, sense of belonging, and community-building skills. Engaging in project-focused digital art activities (e.g., creating one's neighborhood and then combining it with another to create an interconnected city) and guided group discussions fostered support through collaboration and socialization, offering a social environment that resonated with the interests of participants and promoted peer connections. These findings support several other studies (Afsharnejad et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2021; Lee, Milbourn, et al., 2024) that have found positive outcomes in autistic youth development programs based on the Five/Six Cs Model of PYD and community-based art programs. Extant ASD research using the PYD Model demonstrates enhanced competence and connection, increased confidence and self-efficacy, and improved social integration and overall well-being among autistic individuals (Lee, Milbourn, et al., 2024; Müller et al., 2017; Wozencroft et al., 2019). With the increasing focus on improving socialization and employment skills for transition-age autistic individuals, it is essential to prioritize skill development through interest-based support (Estival et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2023; Lora et al., 2020).

The Fellowship provides a valuable framework for occupational therapists, art therapists, and educators. Autistic youth face social barriers as they transition into adulthood, impacting community engagement and subsequent post-secondary employment outcomes (Nuske et al., 2019). Therapists and educators can apply key insights from this evaluation of The Fellowship that highlights that strengths- and interest-driven activities foster motivation and self-esteem. Creative arts activities can be educational and therapeutic tools to cultivate self-expression, self-discovery, problem-solving skills, and confidence. Shared creative experiences can facilitate social skills practice, participation, and connectedness. Educators can cultivate a classroom community, while therapists can build therapeutic rapport through these approaches. The findings have significant implications for how therapy practitioners and educators

can support autistic youth and young adults in feeling they belong, connect, and engage within their communities (Hammell, 2014).

### ***Strengths and Limitations of Evaluation, and Future Research***

The literature involving autistic youth and young adults is often limited to medicalized models, with outcomes focused solely on adaptation to communication and social norms (Maw et al., 2024). Deficit-based rhetoric related to ASD interventions remains prominent in the literature (Garcia, 2021). We seek to change this narrative to celebrate neurocognitive differences in thought patterns and build upon autistic strengths through creativity and connection. This program evaluation strengthens the literature by advancing community-centered, identity-affirming, and strengths-based approaches to autistics' care.

Several limitations were noted in this program evaluation. The pilot program consisted of a convenience sample of autistic youth and young adults across six sites; findings may differ in other communities. Implementing community-based intervention programs for autistic youth and young adults presents challenges related to mental health barriers. Some participants or their caregivers shared that social anxiety and depression hindered them from attending the initial session, and mental health struggles made consistent attendance difficult for some participants. Future community-based programs may explore posting facilitator bios, introductory videos, and photos to increase participants' familiarity with the program's artists and educators before the initial session. Adding quotes from former participants, acknowledging their initial anxiety and overcoming that barrier, may also assist future participants in joining. An area of further research is the potential connection between an increased sense of belonging and reduced social anxiety in autistic participants.

In this pilot program, transportation to community-based sites was a barrier for some participants, leading to inconsistent attendance. Facilitating ridesharing or ride-share vouchers may be solutions to transportation challenges. Offering The Fellowship as an after-school program or embedded within the curricula of a community-based day

program or school day would decrease transportation issues. Finally, we did not follow these participants for an extended period after program completion to determine the sustainability of The Fellowship. Future research could explore how vocational and social competencies, e.g., emotional regulation and adaptive behavior in social contexts, were sustained after program completion.

Most participants communicated fluently by speaking or writing. Islands of Brilliance would like to extend The Fellowship to a broader range of communication preferences and abilities. Therefore, future implementation and subsequent study could be extended to minimally speaking or non-speaking participants using an adapted curriculum and reflection tools. The importance of reflection applies to autistic youth and young adults across the non-speaking-to-speaking continuum.

## **Conclusion**

Islands of Brilliance developed The Fellowship curriculum to equip autistic youth and young adults with greater social competence and community engagement through resilience, self-advocacy, identity affirmation, positive social connections, and a sense of belonging (Hammell, 2014; Wilcock, 1998). Rooted in the Five/Six Cs Model of Positive Youth Development (PYD)—Competence, Confidence, Character, Caring, Connection, and Contribution (Hershberg et al., 2014; Lerner et al., 2002, 2011; Lerner & Lerner, 2013)—this curriculum establishes a foundation for fostering social engagement and personal growth. The Fellowship promoted well-being and positive social outcomes by applying a strengths-based, evidence-driven approach. By integrating the PYD framework into arts-based activities, the program engaged participants, facilitated community-building, and enriched experiences.

This program evaluation enhances understanding of strengths- and arts-based approaches to autistics' care by demonstrating that leveraging autistic youth and young adults' interests and abilities, rather than focusing on remediation, leads to positive outcomes. Findings highlight the importance of a supportive environment and a

flexible, person-centered approach in fostering engagement and success. The program's effectiveness was further strengthened by integrating an evidence-based model, a well-structured curriculum, and a safe, trusted community setting. These key elements should inform the design of future strengths-based arts programs and practices in the community, workplaces, and schools.

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