

From the KVSC Studio at St. Cloud State University. This is MINNovation, a higher ed podcast for innovators and educators. I'm Sarah Clark, Director of Online and Distance Learning at St. Cloud State University. And I'm here with my co-host, Chris Stanley, who is the Director of Educational Technology Innovations at St Cloud State. Dr. Theresa Estrem is a professor in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at St. Cloud State University, where she teaches, provides clinical education to graduate students and does research with an emphasis on autism. Dr. Estrem has been a certified speech language pathologist for over 30 years. She attended the University of Minnesota graduate school where she received her master's degree in communication sciences and disorders, and her doctorate degree in educational psychology. In 2021, she and her colleague, Dr. Rebecca Crowell were awarded a Minnesota state Innovation grant for the SCSU Autistic Student Success Initiative, also known as SASSI. Welcome Dr. Theresa Estrem and thank you for being here with us today. We're excited to talk to you more about your 2021 innovation grant project, Supporting Autistic Student Success Initiative or SASSI like Chris said. So, while we were planning this episode with you, we were reminded how the language we used to talk about disability has changed over the years. Can you help us better understand that history and the difference between the language styles and the rationale behind each? Sure, well, first of all, thank you for having me. I'm really excited to share my experiences with SASSI. So, over the years we have changed the language we use when referring to people with disabilities, and for a long time it's been focusing on the person-first. So, I would say something like a person with autism as opposed to an autistic person or autistic. But over the years I'd say in about the past 10 years or so there's been more of an emphasis, largely by the community of people with autism and also other communities such as the deaf community to use identity-first language. And so instead of saying a person with autism to say an autistic person and that's largely because they feel that who they are with their autism or with their deafness is all about them. They cannot be themselves without that disability. So many people with autism, many adults especially, do prefer the identity-first language rather than person-first language, but it, both are still used a lot and I think it's a, it's kind of coming of age in terms of what to use. And so, I myself, because I was brought up in that era where you use person-first language, I do tend to vacillate between the two. But if I'm talking to somebody with autism, I will ask them, do you prefer me to use person-first or identity-first language. So, what does it mean, or what would it look like to increase autistic student success on campus? Well, it means a lot of things to me, but in part of what our innovation grant proposed was for, us to number one get an advisory board. And that advisory board would include people, faculty, staff, and students who in some way, are, have autism in their lives. And so, our advisory board includes, one autistic faculty member and one autistic student, as well as a number of faculty who have themselves a family member with autism and or they teach autism. So, in my case, I don't have a family member with autism, but I've taught autism and worked with people with autism for a number of years. So that's one component of, of what it would look like. We also, of course it's centered around students with autism and so we want to provide services to students and awareness to students with autism about ways that there are on campus to support them

and also develop ways for us to support students with autism. So, that includes a third factor which is teaching faculty and staff about autism. About the strengths of people with autism as well as some of the challenges that they have. So, the students that are the autistic students who come to college are of course very capable academically to achieve, but there are certain aspects of their autism that may make it very difficult for some of them. And of course, autism is a spectrum disorder and that means that there's no one person with autism that is alike, is the same. And so, we really have to consider each person individually and what their challenges are and what their strengths are. And so, and then the fourth part of our proposal was also to evaluate the success of our program. So to evaluate the impact that we have on autistic student success and also the impact of our educational opportunities for faculty and staff. What partnerships are being formed to collaborate and support this work in these four goals? Wow, we've met with so many people that it's gone so far beyond what we ever hoped it would be, would go and I would say one of our biggest connections and most important connections is working with Dr. Nicholas Wright of the, he's the director, a new director since April of the Student Accessibility Services. And we really wanted to write the grant with him, but he, there was no place in his position, no one in his position at the time. And so as soon as he was hired and as soon as we found out, we got the grant, we immediately contacted him and asked him if he would like to be involved and he was enthusiastic, and he's been an enthusiastic participant since then. But we've also reached out to faculty and starting next semester, we have a lot in the works about faculty training opportunities. Part of this semester has been just getting to know what faculty want and what staff want. So, another part that we've been doing is reaching out to the advisory, that, so we now have professional advisors on campus for first and second year students, so reaching out to them about what autistic students might need in, in, that might be different than other students in how they advise in terms of making it concrete, providing written documentation and other ways to communicate with them. So, the advising people have been a key element of what we're doing. We've also met with the Career Center to talk about longer range as the students start getting into their junior and senior years, what they can be doing to support their career success, so with interviews and so on. So, we hope to continue that collaboration. Let's see, there's also been communications with the Dean of Students. The dean of students, I guess she's called. The Dean of Students, just in terms of ways that we can support her staff in working with students, that includes residential life. So, we've also been talking about providing, attending some of their meetings on a somewhat regular basis so we can support them with some of the autistic students that they have in the residential halls. I think, and it goes on. I mean we've and I think there's more and more, people are learning more and more about what we're doing. We have people reach out to us, which is amazing, and we're also finding that we can support individual students in certain circumstances, such as like there's also the behavior intervention team and some of the students that have some problems with, or complaints related to behavior, our autistic students. And so, we're hoping to also work with the behavior intervention team to be more preventive rather than reactive when there's an autistic student, and some problems related to their interactions with others on campus. Dr. Estrem those

collaborations, I mean, they sound super impactful and important, and this might be a bigger question and more of a continuing conversation, but what work is really needed to sustain this work beyond the funding to create a supportive and inclusive institutional framework for students with autism? Well, I think first and foremost is autistic students need to know about us. And I've, we have found that over the semester, that has been one of the major ways that the word is being passed. So, autistic students tell other autistic students, which is amazing. So, it's just the, the fact that autistic students want to tell other students about us, and other students come and say, wow, I've never known a space like this before is I think one of the major indicators that the work that we're doing is important and therefore it should continue. I think other things though, that we need to consider is that it fits with President Wacker's, 'It's Time' initiative in particular, and especially, I think especially, important is the individualized student supports and like I said before, the student, autistic students are very different from each other and they really do need to be understood at an individual level and given supports at an individual level as well as being able to share all of their strengths with faculty and staff and so on so that people aren't sometimes afraid of how to approach them or how to talk to them about if they have some concerns. We need support from our dean, Dr. Shonda Craft, who is in the College of Health and Wellness Professions. And currently part of the 'It's Time' initiative includes a focus on autism too, there is a potential autism clinic coming to campus and I can really see how this would fit in with the autism clinic in terms of an encompassing, not just autistic people from the community, but also and training our students, but also including our St. Cloud State students to be supported by this, by this clinic in general. And I think too, another big factor to sustain this is that faculty and staff and the programs, the student support programs on campus, see that it's a benefit and that we have something to offer in terms of supporting these special students. So, part of sustainability is funding. So, I would definitely want to talk about your and Rebecca's experience pitching at the 2021 Shark Tank Open. And you guys were actually awarded the large seed, that's \$25,000. So, congratulations on that. That's awesome. Can you tell us more about your initiative and your experience pitching at Shark Tank? Sure. Well, so first we made an initial proposal in 2020 and it wasn't accepted, we didn't move on to the next step, which is Shark Tank. So, in 2021 we decided we still wanted to pitch it. We thought it was an important enough initiative to try to get funding for. So, we looked at the reviews from the past evaluators and we changed a few things, but not so much our ideas about the program, but more specifics about the students that would reach the potential number of students that we would reach as well as more specifics about how we would spend our money and how we would evaluate the impact of the program. And so that then in 2021 we were invited to do the Shark Tank presentation, which was really interesting and exhaustive I would say. Because of what we did, we don't have a service, we don't have a product to pitch like a lot of the Shark Tank proposals do. And so, we really thought about how can we pitch this and show the impact of our, of the potential impact of the proposal. And we decided to interview people that are impacted in one way or another by people with autism and that included interviewing faculty who have autism and, and or family members with autism. And it also included faculty who work with students with

autism and several students with autism, were also interviewed. And altogether, I think we had 8-10 hours of interviews and we had to narrow that down into seven minutes between pitching the important aspects of our program, but also with the interview responses that, that we could highlight how this really would impact people with autism. So, it was a great experience. And we were lucky enough to be awarded the Shark Tank initiative. And that's awesome. So that initiative, can you talk more about how it's engaged students and faculty and others on campus? Sure. So, in the, I would say this first semester has been really focused on recruiting autistic students to, to the program. And we started out the semester with probably three autistic students in the group. And now we have, I haven't even counted recently, but I think it's 10 to 12 autistic students who come to our meetings and they have just expressed that it's amazing to have a place that they can come to talk about some of their challenges, but also to freely share what, what is very special about them, which oftentimes is related to their to their special interests and their high interests, which often also morph into what their, what their academic career looks like and what their longer-term career looks like. So, this semester is really focused on the students. We initially thought that it would be a mentoring program, but as it turned out, we really didn't have enough mentors and mentees matches to make that work out. So, that morphed into having more just a group where students gathered and our graduate students in communication sciences and disorders usually lead off with the topic that got the students talking and they did a lot of problem solving together about some of their challenges and how they worked at overcoming them. For example, many students with autism have difficulty with organization and planning. And so, part of the discussion would be like, how do you organize your dorm room so that you can find what you need when you want it, whether it's your academic paperwork or your keys when you're leaving your room or whatever it might be? And then another piece is planning for the semester. So, I would say that all many, most freshman's have that challenge right of planning their, when they need to get their homework assignments done as well as planning long-term for getting a project completed or even studying for a midterm or a final. How do you plan and organize all of that, when really, they have so much free time it seems like they have so much free time because classes maybe only three hours a day, but then they have all this other time. So just doing a lot of really intentional looking at their assignments and what they have due, when it's due and even helping them map out process for planning it. Using a planner, using alarms, whatever it might include. And so, some of our autistic students are juniors and seniors and they were able to help a lot with some of the strategies that could be used for those students. Is their training needed for those? Well, that's a really good question. So, one of the things that, you know, autistic students talking to autistic students, and we also had some neurotypical students in there too that shared their strategies. And so we, our intention was when it was a meant, when we were looking at it as a mentorship program that we would train the mentors and we, we did that we had about five hours of training for the mentors, but as it turned out, we didn't, we grew and there were, there came to be a lot more autistic students that knew about us and wanted to be part of the group, but they didn't have any of the training. And we've also realized through this whole process this semester that mentorship training

needs to be a really important part of the program. And so, we're going to make it a more structured, systematic type of thing. That's our goal moving forward for next semester. So yes, there's, there's training and our students, our students know about autism. Our communication sciences and disorders students know about autism, but they haven't specifically had training working with college students with autism. So, it's part of their training too. Are there plans, you know, as you talk about growth, or just an interest in participation to apply for the Minnstate Innovation Grant, Sustainable Grant? Yes, we do plan. It's due, I think the intent to apply is due mid-December and then the actual proposal is due in January. And so yes, we, we definitely want to apply. We're in the process of talking to our dean right now about, you know, her support for the program and she has been very supportive from the beginning. We've been keeping her updated on what we're doing and the successes and the challenges. And so, and we're also pulling together who because I think what we've decided and I guess what we've wanted from the beginning is that it's not just our communication sciences and disorders department leading it, but it's more of a College of Health and Wellness initiative which includes the Counseling Program and the Applied Behavior Analysis Program and Social Work Program. They are all involved in one way or another with autism in their fields. And so to make it, it's an opportunity for training their students too in some of the work with students with autism. So, talking to the, our dean, but also, exploring with the dean of students or we're not, we're not sure we're still exploring it, exploring with the dean of students or even the diversity, equity, inclusion folks about writing this grant with us. So that it's more college, university-wide, it's not just being led by one department. So, thinking about university-wide support what is one thing faculty can do, right now, in their on ground or their online course, to improve the experience for autistic students that they might not have considered? Well, so I think one thing, if we're talking, what can they implement right now? I would say one of the biggest things is welcoming all students into their classroom and making sure they know the students know that they are open to supporting them in any way that they can. And even to talk about some of the, their awareness of some of the challenges of diversity of students, not just our neurodivergent, autistic students, but just making them know that they're there to support them. And please come and talk to me if you would like some special, not, not special accommodations, they have to technically go through the Student Accessibility Services for that. But in terms of saying, hey, I'm here for you to support you. And so, for example, some students with autism may have difficulty listening to the faculty and taking notes writing it down all at the same time. And so sometimes as the faculty is telling them what is due for assignments in the next class time or the next, you know, coming up in the weeks ahead, it might be hard for that student to hear it and to write it. And so, for the student to be able to go up to the faculty and feel, accept that it's acceptable for them to go up to the faculty and say, hey, I need to talk to you, will you repeat again? What are my assignments? Just, you know, taking one or two minutes to repeat the assignments so they can get that information in one short, simple way. So, I'd say that's one suggestion. There are of course many other thoughts and ideas, and we're in fact going to be doing, presenting at convocation. Dr. Crowell and myself, with Dr. Wright of Student Accessibility Services will be talking about

how to, how to support students with disabilities with communication and accommodation. So they can certainly attend that, and I think importantly share their successes with working with students with disabilities and autism. How can faculty get involved in this work? Faculty can be on our advisory board. So currently we have, I think, 5, 6, 7 faculty involved on our advisory board. That is one thing that, we may be losing some faculty next semester for, or not next semester, but next year. And if more faculty want to be involved, we're always looking for a way that they can share, share suggestions and give feedback about what we're doing. So that's one, one way. Second is, of course, come to convocation. Third, I think, we're going to be starting an autism education series next semester. And so we'll have one major event each month, at least one major event each month. January, starting with convocation, our presentation at convocation and discussion, I will say. And then in February, the third week in February is accessibility month. And so along with Dr. Wright and Student Accessibility Services, there are going to be, there will be at least one event each day that involves learning about disabilities. And so, for example, one is a panel by students with disabilities talking about beyond the label and that will include an autistic student. Then there's also a faculty panel. It will be faculty with disabilities and that we will include, I hope it's still in the planning stages, a faculty who has autism. And then there's also another couple of events planned and I don't have them in my head right now but planned. There's something planned every day of the week and each one includes a student with, includes somebody with autism as well as other students with disabilities. So that's February. Then in March we plan to do a book talk that will be based on a book about autism and in and also follow students with autism will be involved in that book talk. And in April we plan to have a movie about autism with a student panel following the movie that talks about their own experiences with autism and also an opportunity for the audience to ask questions. Sounds good. We will feature all of those events on our website, as well as, how faculty can join the advisory board. We'll have that information linked as well. And you have a Facebook page that we can follow along for updates and upcoming events as well. We hope to launch the Facebook page early January and that will include these events as well as a link to our Facebook page, as well as just keeping people informed about what we're doing and how they can. It will also be a shock, full of resources for faculty to use related to working with students with autism and for students to access, to learn about what they can do to be successful. And also, just any allies, people who want to support students with autism, there will be some resources for them. Good book suggestions, good movie suggestions and so on. That's great. Well, we look forward to following along and supporting and collaborating with you in the future and I'm really excited about this initiative. And congratulations again on the grant funding and thank you for being here with us and chatting more with us today. And thank you so much for having me. I love talking about autism and what we, what we're doing to try to support our students with autism here on campus. Support for this podcast comes from KVSC studio at St. Cloud State University, SCSU Educational Technology Innovations, SCSU Online and Distance Learning and of course, from our listeners. Know someone we should know about? Fill out the guest nomination form found

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