MoZAICS Project: State of the Field Study

Overview of study findings

Last updated January 19, 2024

Background & Methods

This report summarizes findings from three surveys (n=76) and focus groups (n=30) administered as part of the *Modeling Zoos and Aquariums as Inclusive Communities of Science (MoZAICS) for Autistic Individuals* project. This study was designed to look across the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) field to understand what inclusive practices zoos and aquariums are currently using to support autistic individuals across the full zoo/aquarium experience (e.g., general visit, programs, events, design of learning experiences, volunteering, internships and employment). Surveys asked zoo and aquarium employees to respond to open- and closed-ended prompts about their organization's current practices for inclusion of autistic individuals across four areas: the general visit; spaces for exhibiting, learning or working; human resources; and leadership. Additional questions asked about each site's partnerships with autism-related communities (e.g., autistic self-advocates, community-based advocacy groups). Focus group discussions more deeply probed the specific practices used by different zoo/aquarium facilities as well as how these practices are informed and evaluated.

Limitations & Considerations

Many of the sites that participated in the survey and focus groups appear to be early in their journeys toward inclusion for autistic individuals; most had just begun addressing autistic inclusion within the general visit, such as learning certifications or providing regulation tools (e.g., fidgets, sensory rooms), without a well-defined strategic approach or broad implementation throughout the site. This may be indicative of a broader pattern in the field, but it may also indicate bias in the data.

Key Findings

Most sites are focused on general visit experiences; less so on inclusive work spaces.

Sites are focused on access and inclusion in the general visit space, and considerably less so on workplace settings. In the general visit, sites focused on sensory supports (e.g., specific hours, bags, maps, and reducing sensory inputs) and regulation tools (headphones, fidgets, chewers, planners) for young visitors with limited attention to autistic adults. These approaches encourage autistic persons to tolerate the space, rather than create flexible, inclusive experiences for all visitors. Few organizations define accessibility and inclusion considerations for autistic workers, and strategies were commonly limited to trainings around autism that met basic certification requirements.

Advocacy groups, peers, industry leaders, and non-autistic advocates are main sources of info.

Zoos and aquariums commonly seek general information about autism from 1) other Z/As, 2) autism advocacy groups, 3) professional organizations or industry leaders, and 4) non-autistic advocates such as caregivers or care partners; these sources also inform tool and experience design. Autistic self-advocates are infrequently engaged as source of information for zoos and aquariums.

Individual respondents feel prepared for this work; but not always so about their organization.

Respondents feel positively about their level of awareness, preparedness, and ability to implement practices that advance inclusion for autistic individuals. Individuals indicate that their organization's level of readiness is wide-ranging because of their site's awareness, preparedness, and (flex)ability to implement new and inclusive practices.

Most sites have barriers to inclusion and need to determine next steps beyond initial trainings.

Respondents report barriers with norms, structures, and practices at their zoos and aquariums that prevent inclusion, with a ¼ reporting rigid norms in zoo and aquarium operations and limitations caused by physical spaces. Most recommend increasing funding to implement inclusive practices, increasing support for trainings, enforcing completion of trainings, and for organizations to determine next steps beyond trainings.