

MoZAICS Project: State of the Field Study



Summary of findings from Survey #3, Individual and Organizational Readiness

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Background

The following pages describe initial findings from the third of three surveys administered in a state of the field study 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). In the third survey, zoo and aquarium employees responded to open- and closed-ended prompts that asked respondents to reflect on their as well as their organization's readiness to support the inclusion of autistic individuals through awareness, preparation, commitment of resources, and other factors that may affect one's ability to implement inclusive practices. Respondents were also asked to reflect on what kinds of supports would help them to be better prepared to implement inclusive practices for autistic individuals (both staff and visitors).

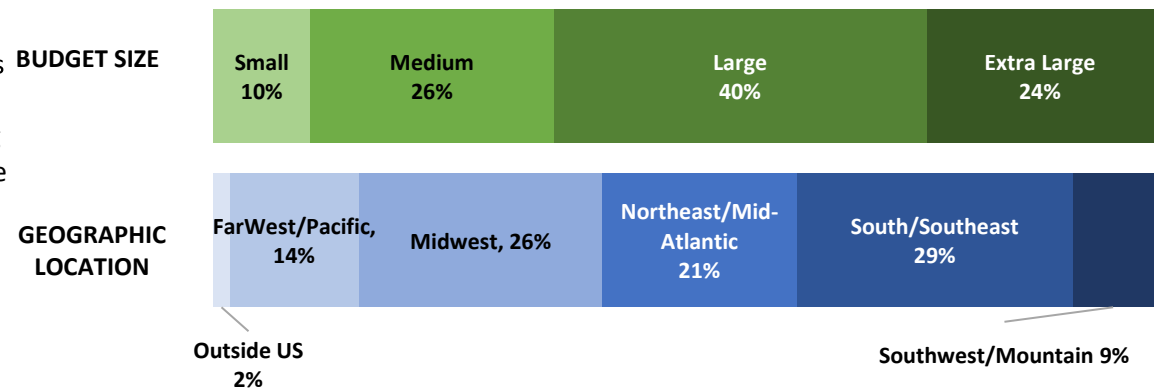
Methods

Participating organizations were recruited in three ways: 1) through self-selection at AZA annual and mid-year meetings, 2) in targeted recruitments through the professional networks of project staff and PIs, 3) through AZA discussion forums and 4) through snowball sampling based on referrals from existing study participants. Participating organizations elected to share the email address of one representative of their organization who would serve as that site's survey coordinator; meaning, email recipients were encouraged to review the survey content and forward the link to colleagues at their organization who were better suited to respond, when applicable. Between November 2022 and October 2023, 58 participants representing as many zoos and aquariums

responded to a survey link delivered via email. Responses were collected via Qualtrics and downloaded into Excel. Closed-ended responses were analyzed for descriptive statistics, while open-ended responses were inductively coded for emergent themes.

Who participated in the survey?

Respondents to this survey are diverse in terms of their organization type, budget size, and geography. Participants include 40 zoos, 14 aquariums, and 4 "other" sites (a category which contains safari parks, museums, and nature centers). The sites are also geographically diverse, with distribution across all US regions. Many of the sites that participated in the survey seem to be early in their journeys toward inclusion for autistic individuals. This may be indicative of a broader pattern in the field, but it may also indicate a bias in the data. In sections where respondents self-report individual preparedness, it should be noted that most respondents work in roles that directly address diversity, equity, access, or inclusion at their institution.



Overall readiness: perspectives as an individual & organization

Two sets of questions asked respondents to reflect on their individual readiness as well as their organization's readiness to implement practice that would move their zoo or aquarium toward greater inclusion for autistic individuals (see Figure 3).

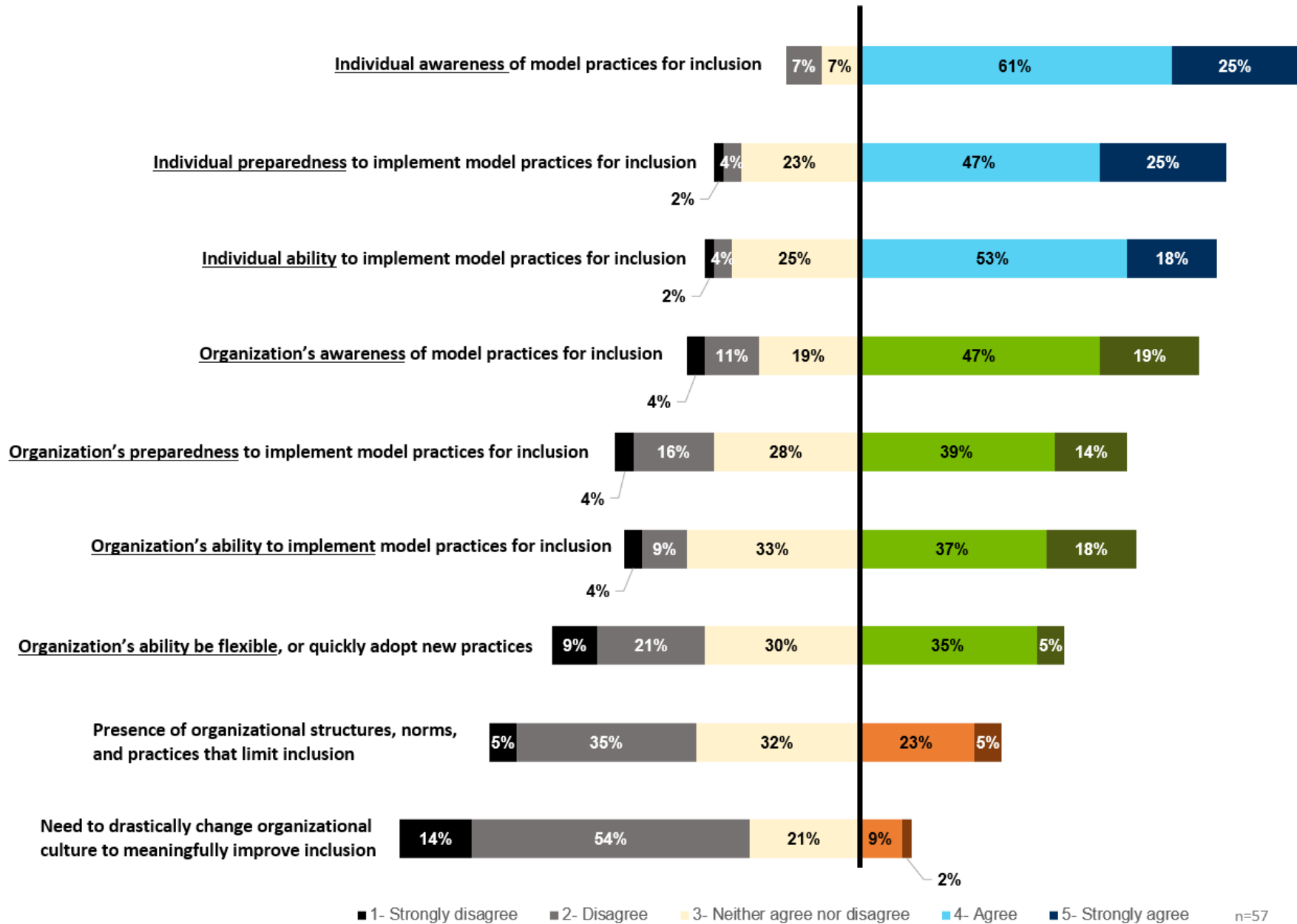
At least 70% of respondents agreed on some level that they as an individual are aware of model practices, are prepared to implement them, and are able to implement them. Because most respondents work in roles that directly address diversity, equity, access and/or inclusion at their institution, this may be influenced by a bias in the data. However, about 10-30% suggested a need for stronger support in these areas.

On the flip side: respondents were more divided about their organization's overall readiness to implement inclusive practices. While over 70% felt that their organization is aware of model practices, only about half felt that their organization is prepared to or able to implement them. Interestingly, about a third felt neutral on those subjects; suggesting that about a third of organizations might be on the cusp on moving into more positive, actionable spaces on each front.

Finally, two questions asked respondents to reflect on the presence of structures, norms and practices that limit inclusion, and whether drastic changes are necessary to meaningfully improve the organizational culture. Responses were across the board when it comes to whether participating organizations have structures, norms, or practices that limit inclusion: just about a third felt positively, negatively, or neutral on the subject. Most (just under 70%) disagree on some level that their organizational culture requires a drastic change in order to meaningfully improve inclusion for autistic individuals; which implies that the changes needed are within reach for most organizations.



Figure 1. Perspectives on individual and organizational readiness

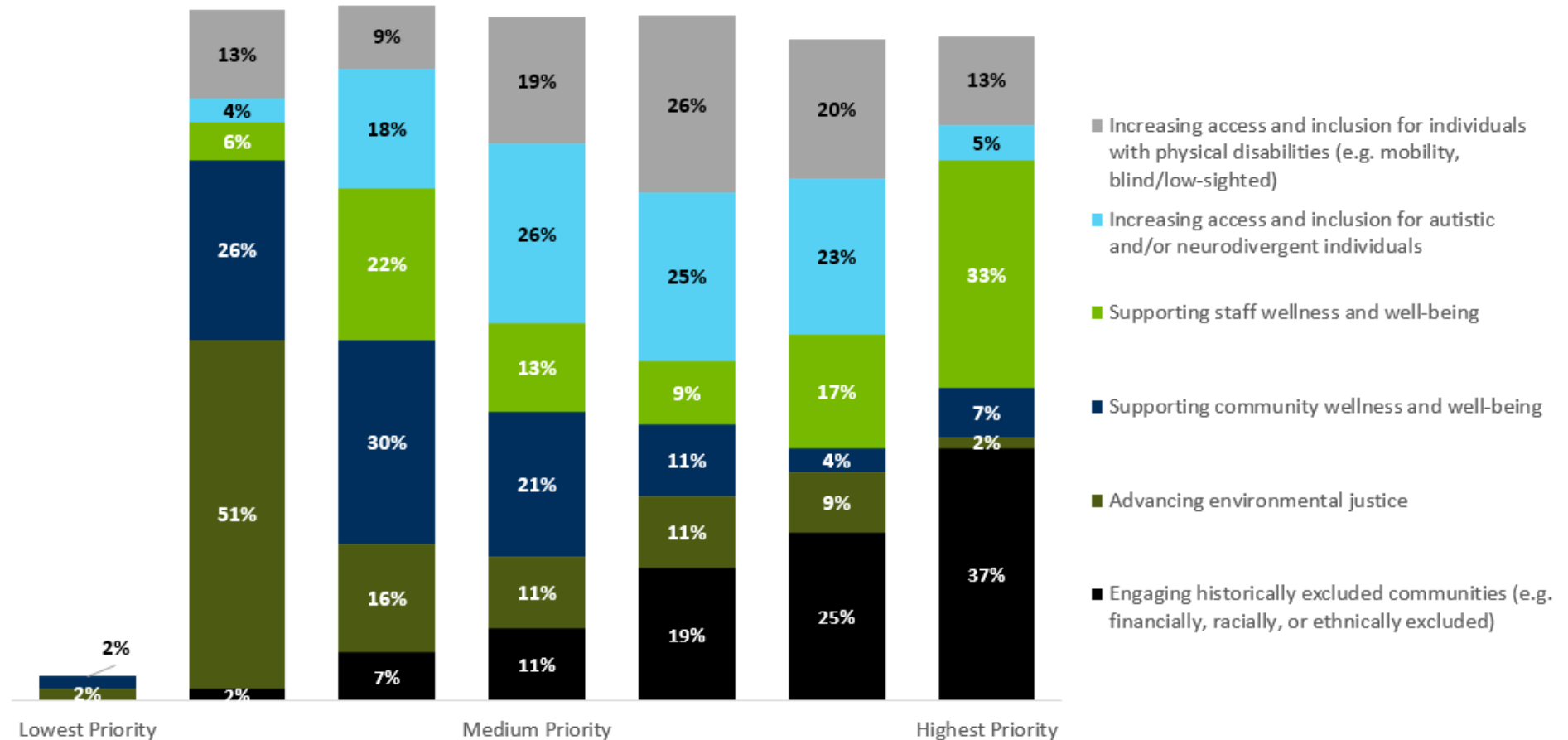


*Note: Percentages are presented here as whole numbers for the sake of simplicity. Numbers may not add up due to rounding.

Ranking priorities among DEAI initiatives

Respondents were asked to consider their organization’s short- and long-term DEAI (diversity, equity, access, and inclusion) initiatives and commitment of resources to those causes, and rank how high their organization prioritizes each cause. When examining the pattern of rankings on a scale of highest to lowest, **increasing access and inclusion for autistic and/or neurodivergent individuals** tended toward the middle in terms of priority for respondents’ organizations.

Figure 2. DEAI initiative priority rankings from survey respondents.

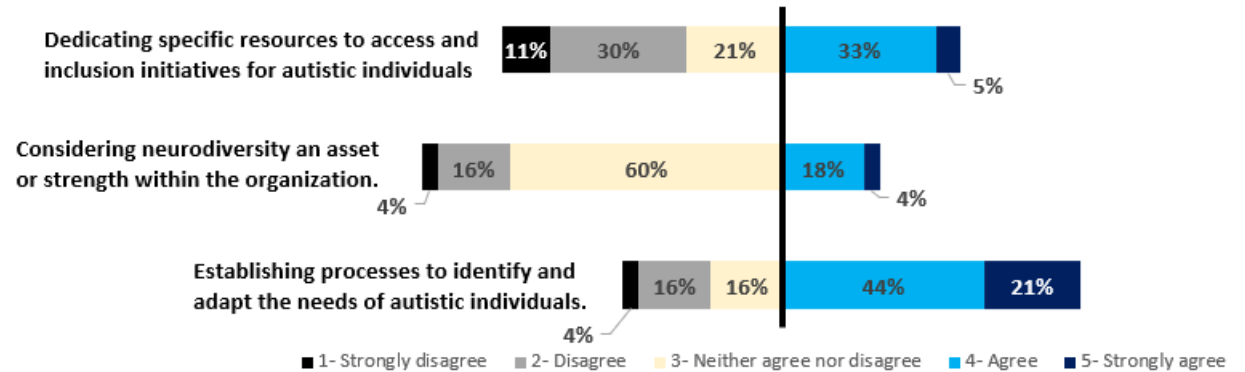


**Note: Percentages are presented here as whole numbers for the sake of simplicity. Numbers may not add up due to rounding.*

Embedded practices that support organizational readiness

The survey asked respondents to rate statements about the presence of embedded practices at that support inclusion for autistic individuals at their organization. Only about a third agreed on some level that their organization dedicates specific resources to inclusion initiatives for autistic individuals, such as dedicated funds or staff time. About a fifth agreed that neurodiversity is considered an asset or strength at their organization; with most (60%) indicating that their organizations were neutral on the subject. Meanwhile, about two thirds agreed on some level that their organization has established processes for identifying and adapting to the needs of autistic individuals.

Figure 3. Levels of agreement about institutional perspectives.



*Note: Percentages are presented here as whole numbers for the sake of simplicity. Numbers may not add up due to rounding.

Organizational norms, structures, and practices that prevent inclusion for autistic individuals

Respondents were asked to share what barriers at their organization (norms, structures, as well as practices) prevented inclusion for autistic individuals. Examples shared spoke to challenges with workplace culture, access to tangible resources, human resources, training, work environments, program offerings, organizational leadership, institutionalization of certain practices, and influence from societal culture (see Table 2 for more details). Most notably, among the specific ideas shared $\frac{1}{4}$ responded that **rigid norms in zoo or aquarium operations** was a barrier. One example stated:

“We have practices in place that feel more accessible, like the ability to work from home for certain positions and Zoom options for meetings, but they always come with caveats that limit accessibility. For example, an expectation to be on camera as much as possible even when on Zoom for a meeting or some department heads and senior leaders being openly skeptical about the productivity in work from home positions. These practices and norms are modeled from the top down and are difficult to overcome.”

A fair number (just under $\frac{1}{4}$) of respondents also pointed to **limitations or constraints caused by their physical space**. This points to a need for greater consideration of human needs in the design of zoo and aquarium spaces for both learning and working.

Table 1. Organizational barriers to inclusion for autistic individuals.

Theme	Specific Idea
Workplace culture	Rigidity in norms and operations * Bureaucracy or red tape for implementing changes Satisfaction w/ level of inclusion achieved w/ initial trainings Overlooking autism/neurodiversity in DEAI efforts Aversion to "extra" work created by DEAI efforts
Access to tangible resources	Limited or constraining physical space * Lack of dedicated monetary resources Lack of staff time or dedicated staffing Difficulty accessing accommodations Limited access to specific tools
Human resources	Existing structures and norms in hiring practices Existing structures and norms in management practices
Training	Lack of training re: autism & inclusion for neurodiversity Limited knowledge re: model practices Poor quality of training around autism Need to move beyond initial training
Work environments	Existing environmental factors Requirements in specific operations
Programs	Lack of accessible program or experience offerings
Leadership	Lack of buy-in from leadership Lack of integration for DEAI in governance structures Lack of representation of autistic persons among staff
Institutionalization	Lack of formal structures for requesting and providing accommodations Lack of institutionalized knowledge Siloed cultural norms & practices
Societal culture	Social stigma or discrimination against autism/neurodiversity

* Asterisk indicates a strong theme (noted among ~25% or more of commentors)

Resources and supports needed to create an inclusive zoo/aquarium environment

There were several overlaps among responses about supports needed from leadership as well as more generally. On both fronts, respondents felt that they needed:

- increased funding to implement inclusive practices,
- more time and space to engage in inclusion work,
- stronger relationships between their leadership/org and local autism communities,
- for leadership and staff to allow shifts in practice within their organization, and
- inclusive hiring practices for those with autism.

Supports needed from leadership

Themes that emerged around supports needed from leadership included changes to operations, leadership in setting priorities, dedication to personal learning, shifting practices within the organization, relationship building, and seizing opportunities to leverage internal influence. Notably strong ideas here include a need to **increase funding** to implement inclusive practices and providing **support for and enforcement of trainings** related to autism and neurodiversity.

General supports for greater inclusion

Among responses about what other supports zoos and aquariums might need to create inclusive environments for autistic staff and visitors, themes emerged that related to operational supports, institutional supports, changing practices, relationship building, evaluation and insights, shifting cultures, and expanding opportunities for those with autism. A strong idea that emerged from these responses was a need for **greater access to trainings** about autism. While many respondents spoke about having completed initial trainings, several stated that rates of completion were spotty across the institution or that the trainings felt like a “first step”.

Table 2. Supports needed from leadership to create an inclusive environment.

Theme	Specific Idea
Operational supports	Increased funding to implement inclusive practices * Support for and enforcement of trainings * Specialized staffing (e.g. accessibility coordinator) Increased staffing Leadership development through coaching or mentoring
Setting priorities	Time & space for staff to engage in inclusion work* Formally prioritizing inclusion for neurodiversity Input about directions to take
Personal learning among leadership (knowledge, values, beliefs)	Personal buy-in to the importance of neurodiversity Personal learning/trainings about autism Allowing shifts in practice within the organization
Changing practices	Inclusive hiring practices for those with autism Offering supports given to visitors to staff as well
Relationship building	Build relationships w/ local autism community Robust lines of communication between staff & leadership
Leveraging influence	Emphasize/reinforce importance with staff down the line

Table 3. General supports needed to support autistic staff and visitors.

Theme	Specific Idea
Operational supports	Greater access to trainings about autism* Increased funding to implement practices Access to tools and practical resources Specialized staffing (e.g. accessibility coordinator) Increased staffing Stronger lines of communication across departments
Institutional supports	Formally prioritizing inclusion for neurodiversity Time and space for staff to engage in inclusion work Formal systems for accessing resources/self-advocacy Systems for accountability in practicing inclusion
Changing practices	Allowing shifts in practice within the organization Inclusive hiring practices for those with autism Applying supports for visitors to staff as well
Relationship building	Build relationships w/ local autism community Advisory committee Robust lines of communication between staff & leadership
Evaluation & insights	Evaluation of current experiences and offerings Guidance about model practices that can be used
Shifting culture	Changing values and perceptions of individuals
Expanded opportunities	Expanded work opportunities for autistic individuals

* Asterisk indicates a strong theme (noted among ~25% or more of commentors)