

# Engaging the Autistic Community in Envisioning Inclusive Zoo and Aquarium Experiences

**MoZACCS**



*This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant Number # 2116026 - Modeling Zoos and Aquariums as Inclusive Communities of Science: Developing a framework of inclusive practices for broadening the participation of autistic individuals.*



# Research Team



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# Modeling Zoos and Aquariums as Inclusive Communities of Science for Autistic Individuals

The project is designed to promote inclusion for autistic individuals across the full zoo/aquarium experience including:



The general visit experience



Programs, events, exhibits, and the design of learning spaces



Volunteer, internship, and employment opportunities

The project also aims for this work to be institution- and field-wide.





# Modeling Zoos and Aquariums as Inclusive Communities of Science for Autistic Individuals

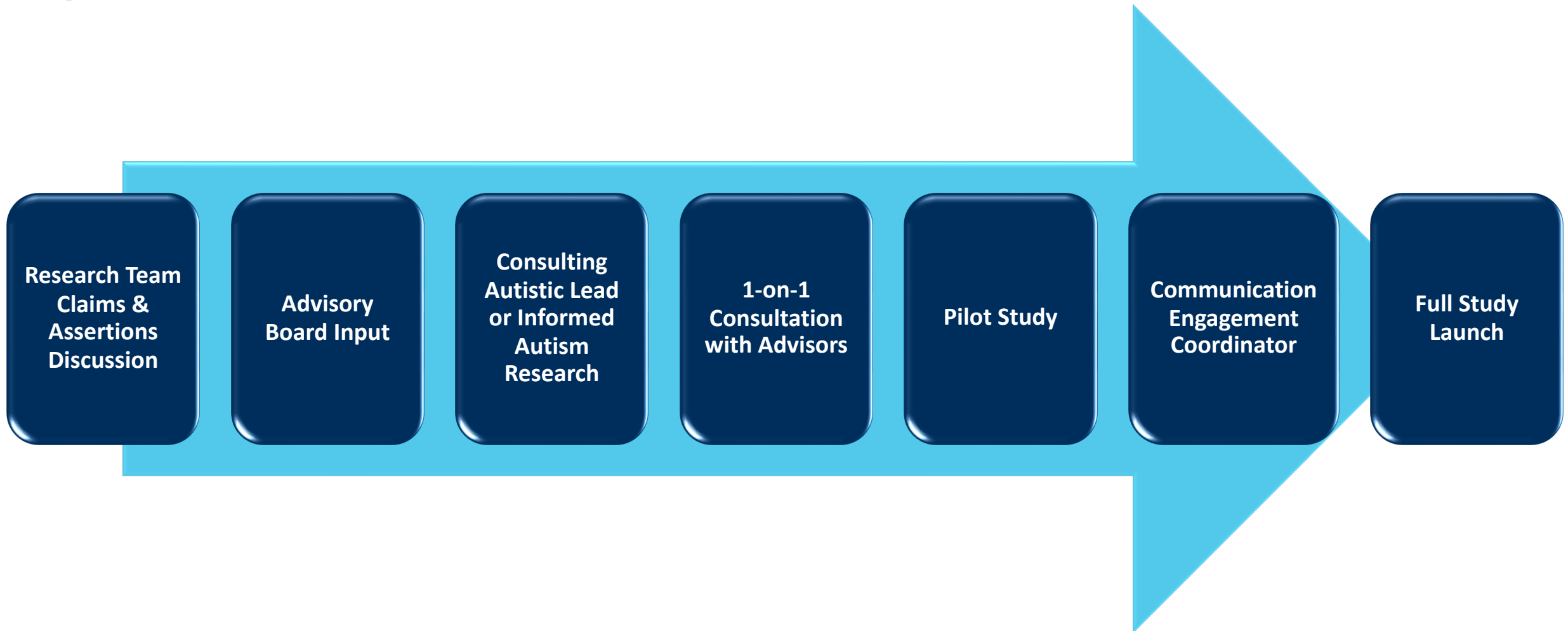
## Key project activities:

- Ongoing research studies;
- A research-informed toolkit for zoo/aquarium practitioners;
- Community of practice of zoo/aquarium practitioners.

# Autism Community Study



# Planning Process





# Research Study

*How does the autism community – including autistic individuals, family/caregivers and representatives/staff from advocacy groups -- define and think about inclusion in zoos/aquariums?*

- Interviews with Autistic Individuals (N=25)
- Listening Sessions with Caregivers/Parents (N=25) and Members of Advocacy Groups (N=5)
- Protocols explored what individuals from each group envisioned for inclusive zoo/aquarium visits, programs, hiring processes, employment



# Data Collection

- Share research questions in advance
- Flexibility and offering alternative methods of contributing (e.g., respond in writing, use of alternative communication tools)
- Option for in-person or virtual data collection
- Analyzing readability of materials





# Research Information Packet



## Getting to the Aquarium

- Our in-person interviews will take place at the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center south building at 801 General Booth Blvd, Virginia Beach, VA 23451
- This building has a blue roof and an otter statue out front.



- If you drive or have someone drive you, you can park in the small parking lot out front. Parking is free at this time of year.

## Getting inside the Aquarium

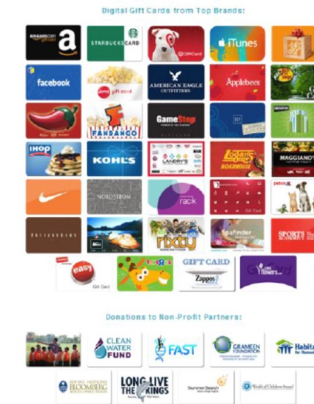
- You can enter the building through the central glass doors of the building.

## What to expect after the interview

- A few weeks after the interview, you will receive an email with a link to claim your \$50 e-gift card as a thank you for participating in the interview.
- The e-gift card will come from Tango, which gives you your choice of e-gift card. It will look something like this:



### The Tango Card Can Be Spent On All of the Following



## Contact Us

- You can contact the research team at any time before or after your interview if you have questions, need help logging on to Zoom or to request accommodations.



# Accommodations Menu



We want to make sure that everyone can comfortably participate in our interviews. If you have a need that is not on this list, please let us know by emailing Kelly Riedinger at [Kelly.Riedinger@oregonstate.edu](mailto:Kelly.Riedinger@oregonstate.edu).

Let us know which of the following accommodations you'd like for our scheduled virtual meeting by emailing Kelly before your meeting time.

## Here's what we have planned:

- We will give you the interview questions ahead of time.
- We will give you an agenda that tells you what will happen during the interview.
- We will remind you about your interview appointment. Let us know which one you would prefer:
  - Email
  - Text message (please provide contact information in your email)
- You can have someone with you during the interview for support.
- You can choose to use only audio or turn your video on or off whenever you want.
- You can share thoughts or ideas in the chat or by creating drawings instead of speaking out loud.
- We will share a summary of results with you once we've finished writing them.

## Before the meeting:

- We can have a casual meeting with the researcher to get to know each other.
- You can send us your responses to the question us ahead of time in writing or a recording.
- We can have a pre-meeting to test any facilitation or communication support systems you use in advance to ensure they work with the Zoom system and microphone.
- You can ask for any other accommodations you need.
- You can ask to reschedule the interview at any point.

## During the meeting:

- We can take breaks after each question.
- You can have live captions or provide cart transcription to show what people are saying.
- We can give verbal descriptions of images.
- You can do whatever helps you feel comfortable (e.g., use fidgets).
- The interview is voluntary and you can skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable and you can ask to end the interview at any time.
- You can ask for any other accommodations you need.



# Recruiting Participants

- Leveraging relationships with autism advocacy organizations
- Community events
- Social media posts
- Zoo/aquarium websites
- Ensuring access





# Instances of Exclusion

- Applying Trauma Informed Data Collection Recommendations
  - Reiterating voluntary nature of the interview
  - Option for facilitation by an autistic researcher
  - Clearly communicating potential risks of research
  - Option for a support person to join interview
  - Option to turn off camera and take breaks



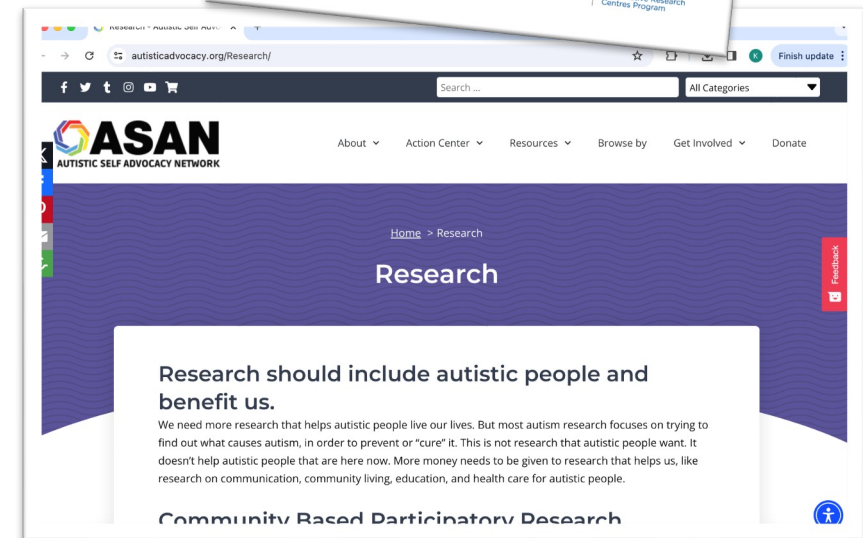
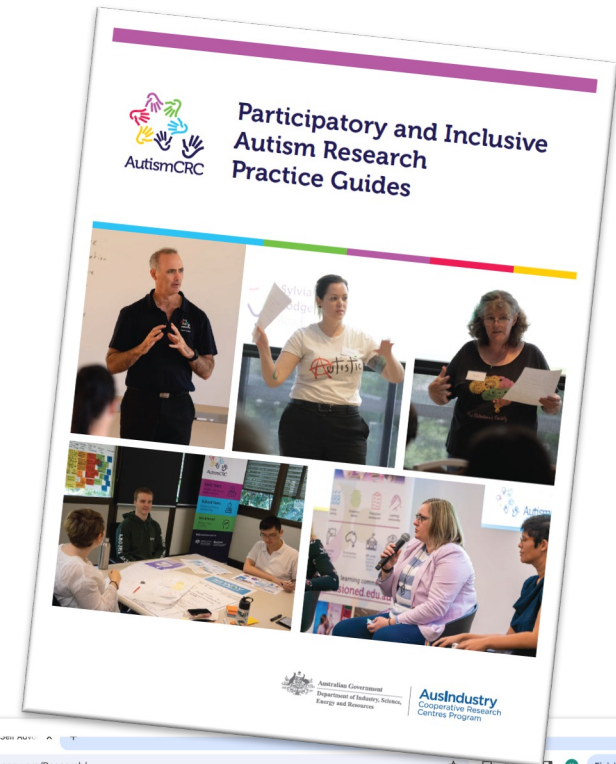
# Study Findings





# Helpful Resources

- Autism Self-Advocacy Network <https://autisticadvocacy.org/>
- Autism CRC Participatory and Inclusive Autism Research Practice Guide
- Academic Autism Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education <https://aaspire.org/>





# MoZAICS Webpage

<https://www.aza.org/MoZAICS>

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## EQUITY & INCLUSION

DIVERSITY NETWORK GROUP

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## Modeling Zoos and Aquariums as Inclusive Communities of Science (MoZAICS) Project

The Association of Zoos and Aquariums, in collaboration with [Oregon State University's STEM Research Center](#) and the [Vanderbilt Kennedy Center's Treatment and Research Institute for Autism Spectrum Disorders \(TRIAD\)](#) at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, received funding from the [National Science Foundation's Advancing Informal STEM Learning](#) to support the [Modeling Zoos and Aquariums as Inclusive Communities of Science \(MoZAICS\)](#) project. MoZAICS focuses on developing an evidence-based framework of inclusive practices for zoos and aquariums to support science learning for individuals with autism across the full aquarium and zoo experience including the general visit, programs, exhibits, internships, volunteering, and employment opportunities. The project will also support building a community of practice of zoo and aquarium practitioners dedicated to the comprehensive inclusion of autistic individuals and toward building an overall strategy of inclusion across the AZA community.

Over the four-year project duration, MoZAICS will develop a research-informed framework, tools and strategic vision for zoo/aquarium practitioners and institutions to support autistic individuals across the full spectrum of the zoo/aquarium experience including the general visit; exhibits; programs and events; and volunteer, internship and employment opportunities. The project is designed as two phases:

1. Research and development of a framework of inclusive practices and tools for supporting autistic individuals and
2. Expand a network of early adopters to build a community of practice around inclusive practices and an overall implementation strategy.

The framework will be informed through a state of the field study across the zoo and aquarium field that includes a landscape study and needs assessment as well as a review of literature that synthesizes existing research across disciplines for developing inclusive practices for autistic individuals in zoos and aquariums. The second phase of the study will focus on sharing the framework and tools with practitioners across the aquarium and zoo field for feedback and reflection to develop an overall strategy for broader implementation and expanding the existing network of zoo and aquarium professionals to build a community of practice dedicated to the comprehensive inclusion of autistic individuals across the full aquarium and zoo experience. A process evaluation conducted as part of MoZAICS will explore how the approach taken in this project may be more broadly applied in understanding and advancing inclusion for other audiences historically underserved or marginalized by zoos and aquariums.

The MoZAICS project represents one of the first of its kind to support autistic audiences within the zoo/aquarium context and is the first to look at the full experience of autistic patrons to zoos and aquariums across programs/events, exhibits, volunteering, internship, and employment opportunities.

Interested in joining our State of the Field Study? Sign up [HERE!](#)

English





# Questions?

PI Kelly Riedinger

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