

Rethinking Higher Education for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders:

The Importance of Adult Transitions

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### Abstract

This research provides a literature review and case study on the impact of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) in higher education. The authors seek to heighten awareness of incidences of ASDs in college settings. This critical issue has implications for the transition of adults with ASDs, their success in the classroom, faculty pedagogy, and how these adults are embraced within the campus culture. The case study and review of the literature serves to provide avenues for fostering institutional awareness and for establishing a culture of inclusiveness for higher education professionals and faculty teaching students with ASDs.

*Keywords:* autism in higher education, transition for students with autism in higher education, strategies for faculty teaching ASD students, and strategies for student services personnel working with students with ASDs

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Institutions of higher education continue to tussle with the concept of student transition, particularly for new, first time students. With growing populations of students entering higher education, the literature suggests that institutions are overwhelmed in their efforts to provide adequate support services. Unfortunately for many first year students, their transition into higher education occurs while they face countless challenges. Many of these challenges stem from being underprepared, first generation, socio-economically disadvantaged, and more recently, autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), cognitive disabilities not visibly distinguishable.

This research provides insight about (1) ASDs prevalence and impact for higher education, (2) a community college case study, (3) suggestions for faculty teaching students with ASDs, and (4) recommendations for the future of higher education.

### **The Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) created the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network. This group of programs, funded by the CDC, was established to conduct research to determine the number of people with ASDs in the United States (Center for Disease Control [CDC], 2006). According to the CDC and ADDM (2006), data show that between 1 in 80 and 1 in 240 children, with an average of 1 in 110 have an ASD. Research further indicates that ASDs is not prevalent within a particular race or socioeconomic status, but it is four times more prevalent in boys. It is estimated that ASDs affect 1 to 1.5 million Americans (CDC, 2006).

**How autism impacts higher education.** According to Taylor (2005), ASD research implications have not been progressive over the last 60 years. Taylor (2005) suggests that ASDs have only recently been recognized in higher education. Haley (2011) offers that accurate data does not exist articulating the number of ASD students entering and/or attending institutions of higher education. To complicate matters, little research exists about transitioning and teaching ASD students. Myers, Ladner, and Koger (2011) suggest as the number of students with autism increases, institutions face the challenge of providing resources that will accommodate them.

It is common for colleges and universities to offer transitions programs or courses, such as first year experience, to help students learn more about their institution, key terminology, and support services. However, traditional programs and services cater predominantly to a population of students without disabilities. Myers et al. (2011) contend that transitioning young adults with ASDs into higher education can be challenging (Geller & Greenberg, 2010). For the average college student without disabilities, he or she can expect to transition to college and begin to experience and achieve basic tasks such as gaining a sense of self, developing values and personal preferences, setting goals, establishing peer connections, and more importantly, becoming independent of family. These life tasks are affected for ASD students for a number of reasons (Geller and Greenberg, 2010). The most compelling reason is due to the having somewhat of an invisible disability. ASDs are disabilities that are not as obvious as blindness or a hearing impairment (Taylor, 2005; Geller & Greenberg, 2010).

Taylor (2005) offers that since very little is known about ASDs, it may be difficult for higher education personnel to understand why it is necessary to incorporate adjustments to academic practices to accommodate ASD students. Taylor (2005) argues that it may be difficult for both faculty and students to truly appreciate the struggles of an ASD student transitioning to

the college setting and also learning to cope with his or her disability. Taylor (2005) asserts that the variances of ASDs exist for students that translate differently for each individual student. He argues that because of these variances among ASD students, there may be difficulties making appropriate adjustments to academic practices. Moreover, faculty and staff may not even recognize or perceive ASDs in students.

### **A Community College Case Study of Autism**

My experience with teaching First Year Experience (FYE) courses at a community college in Northwest Ohio began four years ago on a personal ambition to help first year college students' transition to college life. The course is designed to provide first year students with two hours of face to face weekly instruction on academic planning, time management, study skills, navigating around campus, the availability of campus resources, and more.

My first experience teaching an ASD student in higher education began much like other normal semesters did. I had taught First Year Experience twelve times over the course of four years and enjoyed the diversity of my students. Prior to the start of the class, I was approached by a young male student that had selected a seat in the first row of the classroom. He handed me a note that was folded in half and stapled. I opened it. It was a typewritten note from the campus office of disability services that indicated his eligibility for a volunteer note-taker (that I must solicit for in class) as well as extended time on tests. At this point, I had no idea why this student needed these accommodations, but I certainly did not want to ask the student this question in front of the entire class.

As class began that day, I noticed him fidgeting in his seat. I attempted to make eye contact with him and he did not reciprocate. I continued explaining the course expectations as outlined in the syllabus. At one point, I noticed that he was not turning the pages in his syllabus.

Later within the class period, he raised his hand and then struggled to articulate his question. I struggled to understand what he was asking while his fellow classmates laughed and snickered. Yes, in college.

After that class, I spoke with him and he mentioned that he has “Asperger’s” and then he struggled to explain what it is and how I could help him in my FYE class. I asked him if the note taker and extended testing time were going to help him manage his struggles. At this point, he explained that he was not stupid, did not struggle academically, and that neither accommodation would do the least bit of good in his circumstance. He did agree; however, that he completely understood the assigned work for the week and offered that it seemed very easy.

The following week, he returned to class with all of the assigned work completed. Yet, in class I perceived him to be disruptive, constantly asking questions that were off topic and basically interrupting the flow of the class format. My initial thoughts were that he was basically struggling to function in the college classroom. At that point, I was embarrassed that I was so frustrated with a student that had a documented disability and undoubtedly the intelligence to succeed in my class. I decided to tell no one about my struggles and instead started researching about ASD on the Internet after class. I ended my research in tears, feeling bad for my student that was struggling to communicate and ask questions in my class, only to be misunderstood by me, his instructor.

At the next class, I talked to the student before class and simply asked “what can I do to make your life easier in my class?” He tried to explain in words but stopped and said “I will make you a list.” He sat down in his seat and wrote feverishly about how I could help him adjust and learn in class. This list served as a critical tool as I helped him adapt and grow in my class. Although, he could not communicate face to face with me exactly what he needed me to do, it

was a simple task for him to write it all down. I quickly learned that verbal communication was not his strongest ability yet he could write perfectly and be understood on paper.

As the semester progressed, he surpassed my expectations and scored well above his peers on quizzes, writing assignments, and projects. He was incredibly intelligent and a joy to have in class. He would never miss a class, always arrived on time, and was eager to learn. I never met his mother but she would send handwritten cards to me about his progress and how thankful she was that he was having such a positive learning experience in college. This was humbling. He passed my class with one of the highest grades and is still working towards his educational goals today at the same institution.

**The next semester, a new autism spectrum disorder student.** As I began to teach FYE for the thirteenth time, I reflected on the past semester and thought, “I could never be challenged like I was last semester or learn as much as I did from a student.” I was wrong.

After the end of teaching the first class of the semester, as all of my students were filing out of the room, a young man and his mother walked into my classroom. The mother apologizes profusely that her son missed class and introduces him. He did not look at me or even acknowledge that I am his instructor. She explained quietly that he had Asperger’s. I quickly explained that I was experienced with ASD students at the institution because I had an amazing experience in the past semester. Honestly, at this point, I thought that every ASD student was alike or at least similar.

His mother further explained his challenges and that he would get overwhelmed easily if he had sensory overload. Further, she was frank about the fact that he had terrible experiences with teachers in high school treating him poorly, he would reciprocate by challenging them, and this would be misinterpreted as threats to the teachers.

When he and his mother first visited the college, they made the decision to self-disclose his ASD to make the transition from high school to college as smooth as possible. They had assumed that the resources available at an institution of higher education had to be much more than what was offered in the public school system. Therefore, they arranged an appointment with the campus disability services office. During that meeting, his mother was candid in explaining possible scenarios in which her son may pose as a threat to an instructor.

Surprisingly, the student and his mother were told by the staff that should he become disruptive, destructive, or threaten to harm anyone in the classroom, he would be forced to abide by the college code of conduct. More importantly, he could face expulsion for his actions, regardless of his disability. In addition, the only resources that the campus disability services office offered him were extended time on tests and a volunteer note taker. Nothing more, nothing less. Of course, his mother was devastated by this news and quickly made the decision to enroll him primarily in online courses. First, to ensure that no one misinterpreted his actions and second, to protect him from being expelled for his potential actions.

I was appalled at the lack of support and available resources for ASD students. With a fever of fury, I contacted my supervisor to express my frustrations. How could this be true? What would happen if he threatened someone in my class? Would I be responsible for contacting campus police? What if he was expelled as a result? I frankly told my supervisor that I would not be able to live with myself knowing that a student with ASD was expelled from the institution for simply being misunderstood. This could not happen.

At that point, we did not know what to expect. Regardless, I had to talk to the student about appropriate classroom behavior in college. Therefore, I began by setting expectations for the semester for the student. I told him firmly that I do have established class rules for my

classroom and I expected him to follow them. I started with providing him a copy of the syllabus and began by reading to him exactly what my expectations were, word for word. With the syllabus, I provided him with a list of every assignment for the entire semester. My expectations were clear at this point and his understandings of my expectations were clear. This foundation in our relationship was crucial and set the stage for the entire semester.

At the next class, he arrived on time, found a seat and began attentively listening to the objectives for the course that day. During this time, I was very nervous about how other students would perceive him. Last semester, my ASD student had been snickered at during the first class simply because his fellow classmates did not understand him. I did not want this to happen again. We began the class with introductions and I crossed my fingers that he would self-identify to the class about ASD. And he did. He may have shared too much about his experiences with education as an ASD student, but it sent a clear message to his classmates about how he struggles in everyday life, not to mention college life.

His desire to self-identify in front of his peers served as an important piece of progress for that semester. In the class, we frequently worked in groups, class discussions were lengthy, and the need to build relationships in the classroom was essential. His peers were understanding and helpful even through his repeated actions, repeated phrases, and constant tactile defensiveness coping through card shuffling. When we talked about time wasters and time management, some students shared that they spent six or more hours per day on Facebook while he shared that he spent 6 or more hours per day playing Dungeons & Dragons (D&D). This was an excellent opportunity for me to incorporate the need to embrace differences of others in life and college. While he learned about why others spend hours on Facebook, the entire class learned about why D&D was important to him. While learning about each other, he would

candidly share his perspectives, not thinking about how others might perceive his comments. Therefore, we spent time explaining respectful ways to communicate in the classroom. He shared that with ASD he needed guidance to understand jokes and sarcasm.

Overall, my experiences working with ASD students in higher education has been challenging yet rewarding. When I am challenged or frustrated by an ASD student, I remind myself that everything is challenging for them and I should be thankful to have the opportunity to help them learn and progress. I have been so fortunate to learn about ASD, how others think and give the gift of higher education to students that may have never been afforded the opportunity.

### **Suggestions for Faculty Teaching Students with ASDs**

According to Myers et al. (2011), typical characteristics of the traditional classroom such as lectures, colorful and decorative walls, and group assignments and activities are problematic for students with ASDs. Myers et al. (2011) explain that these difficulties stem from the challenges with auditory filtering (listening to important sounds while tuning out trivial sounds) and enhanced auditory and visual sensitivities (distractions from other sensory stimuli).

Peck and Scarpati (2009) highlight two significant problems for students on the autism spectrum: (1) transitioning from one activity to another or within the same activity and (2) managing the stress in the classroom setting. Grandin (2007) suggests the use of communication strategies and transitioning routines to combat these challenges. Faculty can work with students by playing upon their strengths, developing their social skills through shared interests, finding or becoming a mentor to students, and creating gradual transitions from college to employment (Grandin, 2007).

Hart and Whalon (2008) stress the value of task analysis to aid in integrating concepts and multiple subject areas. This tool serves to breakdown all tasks into distinctive steps. The task analysis builds into an activity schedule or “to-do list.” This could be pictures, symbols or even written instructions that communicate the what, when, and how for assignment completion (Hart & Whalon, 2008). The authors also suggest the application of universal design principles for the demonstration of student learning. This strategy provides students with the opportunity to demonstrate their learning in a number of different ways.

To supplement the aforementioned suggestions, the faculty member’s ASD student experiences shed light on additional recommendations that are strongly suggested for assisting ASD students in and out of the classroom. The following are recommendations as a result of the case study for practice in higher education:

**Build a relationship with the ASD student on the first day.** Keep in mind that they are struggling with new environments, unawareness of expectations, and with that comes anxiety. As faculty, we can ease their anxieties by nurturing them with warmth and acceptance on the first day of classes.

**Regular interaction.** Encourage the ASD student to arrive before class to review expectations and objectives for the day. In addition, recommend that the ASD student stay after class to recap the outcomes and expectations for the next class meeting including upcoming assignments, projects, etc. By encouraging the student to reach out before or after class, the number of questions and concerns that arise during the class time is reduced and other students in the course are less frustrated by the number of interruptions.

**Build a relationship with their parents.** Do not be afraid to work with the parents of ASD students. With documentation to meet the legalities of Family Educational Rights and

Privacy Act (FERPA) from the student, reach out to the parents to ask them questions. It can be an educational experience for you to learn about the struggles and challenges the parents have faced to advocate for their child. In addition, the parents of ASD students have an incredible insight on how to best meet the educational needs of their child. While this may seem overreaching, parents have been extremely involved in the students' educational lives up until they enroll in college. They want to continue to be involved. I can honestly say that I learned a majority of what I know about ASD from parents of my students. Their stories of struggle are inspiring and their desire for what is best for their child is incredible.

**Share your experience with others in your institution.** It is of utmost importance that faculty share their experiences with ASD students in the classroom with their colleagues, as well as campus administrators and staff. It is important to network with colleagues about the specific needs of ASD students. After all, each semester brings with it a new set of faculty members that may or may not be aware of ASDs. Become an advocate for ASD professional development for peers, staff, and administrators on your campus.

### **Recommendations for institutions of higher education**

Most students are not prepared to transition into the college setting. The same can be inferred for students with ASDs; however, accommodations for students with ASDs expand beyond the confines of the classroom setting. Disability service professionals have to be innovative, forward thinking, and willing to collaborate with their colleagues (Korbel et al., 2011). The process of providing programmatic and physical accommodations for this population of students will not be quick and easy. It needs to include a sense of shared responsibility and ongoing commitment campus-wide.

**The college culture and disability disclosure.** Institutional policies and faculty/peer reactions to autism often are the reasons why ASD students do not self-disclose about their disability. Myers et al. (2011) recommend that students with autism be allowed to embrace their autistic identities rather than hide them. The institution, as a whole, must be willing to work collaboratively with the parents of ASD students, faculty, advisors, therapists, disability services personnel, and student conduct personnel to ensure a collective understanding exists about who these ASD students are as well as their needs and challenges.

**The office of disability services.** In higher education, students with disabilities have rights to accommodations under the American Disabilities Act (ADA). More often than not, these accommodations include a note taker and additional time on tests. According to *Understanding Asperger's Syndrome: A College Professor's Guide*, other accommodations can be made for students such as faculty clearly defining classroom expectations, allowing students to record their lectures, and providing students with access to their class notes. In addition, Disability Services Offices can collaborate with academic affairs and student activities departments to offer brown bag sessions, faculty development seminars, and provide a speaker series with ASD guest speakers in a diversity of career fields.

**The offices of student affairs and student activities.** Nevill and White (2011) suggest that student organizations capitalize on *Autism Awareness Month*. The Offices of Disability Services can coordinate with the Offices of Student Affairs and Student Activities to provide summer transitional programs for ASD students. These offices can establish peer support groups or organizations that provide a social network for ASD students. These offices can work collaboratively to ensure that new student orientations and first year related activities create

awareness about cognitive disabilities. New student orientations and first year related activities can be offered exclusively for ASD students.

**The office of academic affairs.** First Year Experience (FYE) courses are critical to the success of students entering the college setting. In FYE courses students learn how they learn best and they develop a sense of self. A director of FYE could create an FYE course with the purpose of providing assistance for ASD students transitioning into the college setting. The course objectives would include helping students learn how to cope with having an ASD, to self-advocate as a student with ASD, to gain an understanding of the support services available beyond the disability services office, and to develop a personal transition plan. The transition plan would disclose the strengths and personal needs for each individual student based on their ASD. Student plans would align with course content; i.e., development of social skills, understanding time management, receptive language, financial management, self-presentation, and career planning and workplace behavior (Geller & Greenberg, 2010). The overarching learning outcome is for students to work on their social deficiencies by using peer relationships developed in the course. The result of the course would be established cohorts of students who become actively engaged in an ASD peer group/student organization.

## **Conclusions**

For students on the spectrum, the areas of academics, social integration, life support, and career planning may all require adjustments for special accommodations to assist with student success (Geller & Greenberg, 2010). Higher education personnel need to be made aware of ASDs in their efforts to make the appropriate accommodations and teaching professionals have to feel a sense of moral obligation to ensure that they support ASD students since a major aspect of college is social interaction—the true challenge of their disorder. The most powerful message

for institutions of higher education is a commitment to providing appropriate support services for these students. It is critical that disability services personnel, along with their strong partnerships, continue to educate the institution as a whole about the ongoing transitional issues for students with ASDs.

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