

Understanding and Supporting the Unique Needs of Students on the Autism Spectrum

Lisa Meeks, Ann Palmer, and Garret Westlake
AHEAD Annual Conference 2010

Practitioner, Parent, Program...

- **An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure: Addressing the Unique Needs of Students with Asperger's Disorder**
 - Lisa Meeks – John Carroll University
- **Supporting the Student with Autism Spectrum Disorder in College: A Parent's Perspective**
 - Ann Palmer – Autism Society of North Carolina
- **Using StrengthsQuest™ with Students on the Autism Spectrum**
 - Garret Westlake – Arizona State University

An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure:

Preparing Your Campus for the successful transition of Students with Asperger's Disorder

Lisa Meeks
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Director, Services for Students with Disabilities

Asperger's Disorder – DSM-IV Criteria

- (1) Impairment in social interaction-difficulty forming relationships with peers
- (2) Failure to seek out others for interactions, enjoyment or achievements
- (3) Difficulty with social/emotional reciprocity (cannot read social cues)
- (4) Restricted, repetitive & stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, & activities
- (5) There is no clinically significant general delay in language
- (6) There is no clinically significant delay in cognitive development or in the development of age-appropriate self-help skills, adaptive behavior (other than in social interaction)
- (7) Significant preoccupation with specialized area

Characteristics, Asperger's Syndrome that impact learning in Higher Education

- o **Social impairments** – group work, socialization, internships, interviews, extra-curricular activities, living in the dorms, interactions with professors, etc.
- o **Perseverative/idiosyncratic interests** – can interfere with studying, negative impact on socialization,
- o **Need for routine** – difficulty coping with unforeseen changes
- o **Sensory sensitivities** – difficult to be in classroom/dorms; irritability/frustration, sensitivity to air/lighting in large lecture halls.
- o **Comorbidities** – medical & psychological comorbidities can also complicate adjustment in college (OCD, Anxiety, Depression)

What are the unique needs in Higher Education for Students with Asperger's: *How do we address them?*

- *Educate campus and immediate personnel: faculty, housing, dining, advisors, other personnel*
- *Be PROACTIVE vs. REACTIVE*
- *Get informed consent to communicate with University personnel*

TEAM EFFORT

- HOUSING
- ORIENTATION
- MAP OF CAMPUS
- PICTURES
- PROFESSORS
- COUNSELING CENTER
- ADVISOR
- POLICE FORCE
- CAREER CENTER

HOUSING:

- Work with residence life to accommodate student with single room.
 - Serves as a 'safe space' for student to decompress
- Monitor planned activities so that you can encourage involvement: recommend clubs, organization that match students interests
- Work with RA to educate him/her about Asperger's Disorder: RA should contact disability services if they become concerned or notice major change in behavior of student

ORIENTATION

- Typical College Orientation
 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVCzNs7h5DY>
 - Can be NIGHTMARE for student with ASP
 - What's exciting and entertaining for neurotypical students is overwhelming stimuli for the student with Asperger's
 - Work with Orientation staff to develop a separate orientation for students with Asperger's (if you have a large group) or opt for an individual orientation by one of your staff and set up individual meetings with pertinent offices

MAP OF CAMPUS

- Provide student with a detailed map of campus that includes all classroom buildings and dorms
- Identify and highlight a 'safe space' for each building.
- Identify easy/barrier free walking path to/from classes
- Identify location of each classroom/adjacent restrooms
- Locate SSD office and counseling center

PICTURES

- It is often helpful to take pictures of the buildings the student will utilize most. This visual representation supports a familiarity with the campus not available through maps.
 - increases students comfort level once they arrive on campus
 - increase recognition
 - reduce anxiety
 - increase confidence in navigating campus

PICTURES

- Facial recognition is often a problem in students with Aspergers
- Pictures of faculty members, RA, counselor, SSD professors, roommate (people look different out of context)
- Offset some anxiety and help contribute to better recognition-less social awkwardness

PROFESSORS

- Professors must be willing to work with SSD, student-SSD should help navigate course selection/professor selection.
- Develop a relationship with ONE professor in each department- successful relationships will lesson fear of other faculty and eventually many faculty will be willing to work with ASD students.
- EDUCATE THEM!
 - Videos, handouts, coffee and discussion vs. formal training...opening the lines of communication is essential.

PROFESSOR PACKET

- Quick
- Easy to Read
- Positive Image
- Do not disclose students name
 - * dangle carrot-approach as '*there is a student registered in your course*' ask them to call you to discuss it or suggest meeting in person.
 - Make yourself available to meet with them- remember an ounce of prevention....

PROFESSOR RESOURCES

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=233-3jtEZck>
- Brief Video, directly linked via email.
 - easy
 - accessible
 - curiosity/interest
 - wanting to know 'who' student is, increases likely- hood faculty will view video.
- Include (in bold) that video is only 12 minutes long.

PROFESSORS cont.

- Most important-open a line of communication
- YOU the Disability office want to be the first line of defense for the student
- PROFESSORS SHOULD COMMUNICATE IMMEDIATELY WHEN:
 - The student is missing classes
 - The student seems highly agitated
 - The student displays a great deal of perseverance
 - The student 'takes over' the classroom
 - The student is being disrespectful to his/her peers.

PROFESSORS cont.

- Arrange to view the syllabus BEFORE the student begins the semester.
 - Discuss necessary accommodations/modifications
 - Group Work
 - May opt for individual assignment which measures same learning outcome
 - Or arrange for the group to meet under the supervision of the professor-assign responsibilities and help (with SSD coordinator/director) set social/academic expectations for student
- Arrange for the professor and student to meet before the semester begins.
 - Familiarity will reduce anxiety in BOTH student and professor.

COUNSELING CENTER

- College counseling centers designed to handle less serious, adjustment and relationship issues.
- Student should have a support system that involves a local psychologist/psychiatrist.
- Get to know local practitioners that specialize in Aspergers.
- Inform counseling center of students arrival and have student develop a relationship with counseling center from day 1. (Again this should be used for emergency/triage purposes only unless you have adequate staffing)

ACADEMIC ADVISING

- Advising without knowledge of Asperger's can inadvertently set students up for failure.
- Advisors should receive special instruction on the unique needs of students with AS.
- The need to break up core requirements with areas of students interest (students with AS need courses in area of interest to keep them motivated)

ACADEMIC ADVISING

- When looking at the core courses should be selected that are more fact oriented and are less ambiguous.
- Student's with AS often require course load reductions
- Degree completion time may be longer given RCL
- Students require breaks between classes to process information (M/W/F classes often better than T/TH)

ACADEMIC ADVISING

- Approach advisers in same manner as professors
- Offer your assistance
- Help design degree completion plan
- Offer input on professors (more structured professors are better-as a rule)
- Students often need individual reminders of drop dates and need more guidance about when it's advisable to drop a course.

ACADEMIC ADVISING

- Good article to share with advisors:
 - <http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/091028jh.htm>
- Included in your packet.

POLICE FORCE

- Most common problem with students with AS is perceived 'stalking'.
- Often students with Asperger's (because they do not understand social norms) will misread a female students kindness for romantic interest and the male AS student will seek student often-attempting to talk with her.

CAREER CENTER

- Students with Asperger's need early guidance on career choice.
- Should be led by students unique interest
- Students need help with resume/interview skills and require more practice than their peers
- Consider government programs '**Workforce recruitment**'
- Should take into consideration needs of students/adults with Aspergers
 - Need to repetition
 - schedule/routine
 - known expectations

SUGGESTED SUPPORTS

- **Asperger's Group**
 - **Weekly group for processing transition and gaining support**
 - Allows Disability Department to 'check-in' with student on a weekly basis
 - Provides platform for discussion (normalization and validation for AS student)-book
 - Opportunity for Social Group (meeting students with similar interests)
 - Excellent time to conduct social skills training specific to college environment.

SUGGESTED READINGS

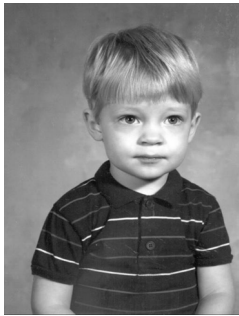
- Aquamarine Blue 5: Personal Stories of College Students with Autism
- Students with Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for College Personnel
- Realizing the College Dream with Autism or Asperger's Syndrome: A Parents Guide to Student Success
- The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome

Questions??

REALIZING THE COLLEGE DREAM WITH AUTISM OR ASPERGER SYNDROME

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Why I'm Here



Making the Decision to Pursue Higher Education

- Questions we asked ourselves as Parents
 - Can he live independently?
 - Will he be safe?
 - Will he fail?
 - Will it make a difference in the long run?
- Helping Eric make his own decision
 - Exposing him to the school and work environments
 - Describe differences between high school and college

Differences Between High School and College

- | | |
|--|---|
| ■ High School | ■ College |
| ■ Strict mandated class schedule- 30 hrs/wk | ■ Student makes own schedule, 15 hrs/wk |
| ■ Smaller classes | ■ Larger classes |
| ■ Frequent graded homework | ■ Homework may not be checked at all |
| ■ Textbook-based | ■ Lecture-based |
| ■ Frequent tests covering small amount of material | ■ Fewer tests covering large amount of material |

Differences Between High School and College

- | | |
|---|--|
| ■ High School | ■ College |
| ■ School is required to serve student | ■ Student must meet academic criteria |
| ■ Frequent reminders by teachers | ■ Student has to keep track of assignments |
| ■ Teachers check on understanding | ■ Student expected to initiate asking for help |
| ■ Tested on reproducing what has been learned | ■ Tested on ability to apply what has been learned |

Importance of Functional Skills

- Independent living
- Personal hygiene
- Communication
- Financial
- Transportation
- Vocational

Self-Advocacy

- Student is an adult- has to initiate
- Student has to understand his/her needs
- Student has to be able to ask for help and explain why he/she needs help
- No information shared with parents unless student requests that in writing
 - FERPA Waiver- Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act

Preparing the Student for Self-Advocacy in Adulthood

- Increase student's awareness of his/her strengths and challenges
- Help student understand that everyone learns differently; everyone needs help sometimes
- Respect the student's point of view; involve them in everyday decisions and choices
- Allow the student to make mistakes
- Talk about the future; prepare and plan

Options of Higher Education

- Different kinds of schools and different levels of participation
 - Community, technical, 2 and 4 yr. Colleges
 - Private programs for students with disabilities
 - Part-time vs. full-time
 - Commuting vs. residential
 - Virtual options- on-line and video
- Considerations when choosing a school
 - Location, size, curriculum, cost, supports available, etc.

Leaving IDEA Behind

- No more IEP's
- No more requirements to serve the student
- Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and ADA Amendments Act of 2008
 - Mandates physical access and program access
 - Doesn't mandate academic "success"
- Determining accommodations based on current documentation

"Lessons"

- Safety - On campus, in dorm room, on the computer
- Academic Issues - Study skills, how to know when he needs help and how to get help
- Health Issues - How to know if he is sick, who to call, when to go to the doctor
- Personal Care - Shaving, showering, laundry
- Time Management

Resource Notebook

- Information from "lessons"
- Contact numbers for family members
- Contact info for campus services – RA, computer services, Disability Services, Student Health, etc.
- Map of campus and bus routes

Resource Notebook

- Financial information- on campus spending account, bank account numbers, bank location and phone number, etc.
- Housing information- dormitory rules, registration information
- Social options- list of free time activities, club and organization information, info on upcoming social events

Orientation

- Importance for the student
 - Dorm room experience
 - Develop familiarity with campus
 - Hearing experiences of upperclassmen
- Importance for the parents
 - Reminder of “typical” parent concerns
 - Learning about accessibility of professors and technology on campus

Disabilities Services Support

- Can be a crucial support for the student
- Make connection as early as possible
- Student needs to develop a comfort level with the office and the staff
- Regular scheduled appointments if possible
- Knowing the right questions to ask

Challenges in College

- Organizational problems
 - Keeping track of assignments and books, being aware of grades, making schedules
- Dealing with surprises
 - Things breaking in dorm, schedule changes, weather
- Knowing when they need help
 - Academically, personally

Challenges in College

- Lack of assertiveness and difficulty initiating
 - Communicating with professors, offices on campus
- Not understanding another person's perspective
 - Professors, suitemates
- Difficulty understanding what is important
 - During lecture, in chapter being studied, in daily life
- Difficulty with social decisions

Challenges in College

- Difficulty with financial decisions
 - Budgeting, accessing money, controlling spending
- Working in groups
 - Scheduling, participating, satisfying responsibilities
- Public speaking
- Dealing with stress of exams
 - Who to go to for help
- Taking and refilling medications

Strategies

- Calendar, lists, schedules (syllabus helps)
- “Rules” to go by, routines
- Notebook to keep track of grades, organizers
- Cell phone, PDA
- Designate who to go to for help
- Regular scheduled appointments with professors

Strategies

- Having a mentor
- Relaxation strategies
 - Practice when not stressed
- Frequent reminders
- Asking the right questions

Team Support for the ASD Student

- Team = Student, DS, Professors, Parents
- Understanding each other’s perspective
- Understanding what each party brings to the relationship
- Clarification of role of each team member

How DS Provider Can Help Parent

- Clarify each person's role in helping the student
- Appreciate the parent's feelings
- Appreciate the parent's knowledge about their son or daughter's strengths and challenges
- Listen
- Connect them with resources

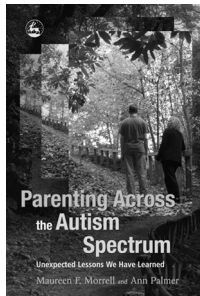
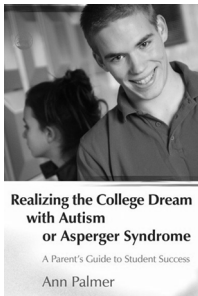
How Parent can Help DS

- Make sure the college has accurate, current documentation about the disability
- Give DS helpful information about working with student
- Prepare the student as much as possible for new environment
- Help the student learn self-advocacy skills
- Be prepared to support the student in non-academic areas

What We've Learned

- The most difficult parts of college may not be academic related
- Start early involving student in advocating
- Letting go is hard
- Parents have to respect the student's decisions and let them make mistakes
- Our children are always learning and they will surprise you





Questions??

Using StrengthsQuest™ with Students on the Autism Spectrum

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Information on StrengthsQuest™

- StrengthsQuest gives students and educators the opportunity to develop strengths by building on their greatest talents
- Grounded in Positive Psychology and the Clifton StrengthsFinder
- StrengthsQuest has helped more than 700,000 people at 600 schools and universities achieve academic, career, and personal success.

Sample Strengths Report

- 1) **Intellection**
 - People especially talented in the Intellection theme are characterized by their intellectual activity. They are introspective and appreciate intellectual discussions.
- 2) **Learner**
 - People especially talented in the Learner theme have a great desire to learn and want to continuously improve. In particular, the process of learning, rather than the outcome, excites them.
- 3) **Achiever**
 - People especially talented in the Achiever theme have a great deal of stamina and work hard. They take great satisfaction from being busy and productive.
- 4) **Responsibility**
 - People especially talented in the Responsibility theme take psychological ownership of what they say they will do. They are committed to stable values such as honesty and loyalty.
- 5) **Relator**
 - People who are especially talented in the Relator theme enjoy close relationships with others. They find deep satisfaction in working hard with friends to achieve a goal.

10 Week Program Model

1. Introductions and group rules
2. Completion of StrengthsQuest™
3. Interpretation of strengths
4. Career Services
5. Campus Police
6. Campus Housing
7. Budget and Finance
8. Pre-vet Club
9. Student Counseling (Relationships & conversation)
10. Wrap up

Observations

- Development of community
 - “I’m not alone in the world”
 - “I can’t eat your pizza, but I have an invention to discuss with Chris”
 - Roommates?
- Peer feedback on behavior
 - “Stop being weird”
 - “You don’t need your sunglasses in here”

Observations cont.

- Surprising “honeybee” strengths
 - Empathy, adaptability, relator, and connectedness
 - Relator and connectedness were common trends across most students
- Faculty/Staff relations
 - Guest speakers enjoyed the conversations and felt empowered to work with students
 - More excited to work with DRC students in their own areas after speaking/engaging with group
 - Professionals enjoy working with students when they feel prepared and have the appropriate background

Fall 2010 Pilot Program

- 15 week 1-credit course
 - Based on strengths, but with classroom and online component, readings, and discussion
- Living Learning Community
 - ASD students involved in hiring their own RA and live in common residence hall.
 - RA is social coordinator as well as after hours support
- Engage academic units
 - Multiple employment, practicum, and internship opportunities for students across disciplines

Campus Benefits

- Immediate peer group and safe space
 - Students learn from guest speakers while also sharing information on housing, faculty, courses, majors, and extracurricular activities (without prompting).
 - Build friendships with “like me” peers.
- Staff develop appreciation for an emerging student population
 - Promoted an “our” students vs. “your” students environment
 - Eliminated the fear factor and empowered staff

Campus Benefits cont.

- Improves parent relations
 - Program demonstrates a proactive vs. reactive approach to supporting students
 - expresses a campus wide commitment to all students.
- Maximizes department resources
 - Prior to group - 6% of registered students were on the spectrum and filled 26% of office appointment slots
 - Post group – appointments for students on the spectrum dropped 8% to only 18% of office appointments
 - Approximately \$10/per student for assessment
 - Guest speaker model means limited “programming” by DRC staff.

Recommendations

- Identify students
 - Choose a meeting time that allows the largest number of repeat customers to attend
 - Consider students with similar needs (ex. students w/TBI)
- Identify faculty/staff willing to partner with DRC as guest speakers
 - These may be allies or those units where you feel students are lost on your campus.
- Solicit feedback from students on topics they would like covered (ex. pre-vet)

Recommendations cont.

- Start small
 - The 10 week program ran over the middle of the semester and avoided the hectic first few weeks of classes and final exams.
 - Even a 5 week program focusing primarily on strengths builds a language you can use in individual meetings
- Incorporate all students
 - All 2010 freshmen will take StrengthsQuest™ as part of their freshman year experience.
 - The strengths based language will be used across areas.

Questions??

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