



Quarterly Update

College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) are a group of developmental disabilities that are marked by impairments in social interaction and communication and the presence of unusual behaviors and interests (Klin, McPartland, & Volkmar, 2005). Autistic Disorder (autism), Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger Syndrome comprise the ASDs. It is unclear if the incidence of ASDs has actually increased during the past two decades (Fombonne, 2005). Nevertheless, postsecondary institutions are seeing an increase in the number of students with ASDs.

In order to be admitted into postsecondary education, individuals with ASDs must meet the same entrance requirements as all other prospective students. Once admitted, students with ASDs may require additional supports and reasonable accommodations in order to effectively access learning. It is important to remember that individuals with ASDs are unique and vary in how the ASD impacts the educational experience. The following are some general characteristics of individuals with ASDs and some ways that university faculty and staff can mitigate the effects of the ASD on the students' educational experiences (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Perner, n.d.; Sicile-Kira, 2004; Taylor, 2005).

Social and Communication Skills

Students with ASDs have deficits in their social and communication skills. Many students with ASDs are interested in developing relationships with their peers, but do not understand the subtleties of social interaction and communication. Nonverbal social cues may be inadvertently ignored, leading to miscommunication between the individuals. For example, students with ASDs may stand too close to others while speaking, not realizing that they are invading the personal space of others. Additionally, the ability to empathize with others is not a skill that comes naturally to individuals with ASDs. Because of this characteristic, individuals with ASDs may appear to be self-centered. Finally, students with ASDs may dominate conversations, especially when talking about a topic of high interest (i.e., an obsession). The individual with an ASD may have trouble taking turns speaking during the conversation. Social skills training and support groups for students with ASDs may be beneficial in helping the student understand social and communication interactions.

The manner in which students with ASDs speak may also be different. They may speak in a formal manner and with unusual intonation. Language may be interpreted literally and sarcasm is not easily understood. Therefore, faculty and staff who interact with a student who has an ASD should do so in a direct and literal manner.

Because of these limitations in social and communication skills, students with ASDs can feel socially isolated and may sometimes be the victims of bullying. Or, in some cases, it is the student with an ASD who is being the harasser. For example, a student with an ASD may become infatuated with another student and continuously ask her out on a date. Faculty and staff need to be cognizant of the social and communication issues of the student with an ASD and should use that knowledge to thoughtfully design course projects, class discussions, and personal discussions. In some cases, al-

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ternate assignments in the place of group assignments may be appropriate. It is beneficial for a university mentor to spend one-on-one time with the student in order to help the student with any communication or social issues that arise.

Social Behaviors

Although behaviors such as rocking and hand flapping are usually associated with more severe occurrences of ASDs, high functioning individuals with ASDs may also engage in perseverating behaviors. For instance, students may blink excessively or tap their foot repeatedly. These types of behaviors stem from the individual trying to alleviate stress or over-stimulation from the environment. Another way that individuals with ASDs combat anxiety is through the use of schedules and routines. Changes in a routine, such as a course being cancelled due to instructor illness, can cause much stress to an individual with an ASD. Although these types of situations cannot be prevented, alerting the students of the possibility and the procedure in which the students will be notified at the beginning of a course can help the student with an ASD. Similarly, rigidity regarding rule-following is another characteristic that can cause problems if the student with the ASD attempts to “police” fellow students. In this type of situation, the instructor needs to set the boundaries in the course. Again, direct discussions with the student with an ASD may be necessary.

Individuals with ASDs sometimes have unusual sleeping patterns, and should be advised to schedule their classes during times that are naturally comfortable for them. For example, some students have difficulty waking up for early morning classes. Therefore, these students should avoid scheduling classes during this time of the day. Priority registration may be an appropriate accommodation. If living in a campus dormitory, it may also be beneficial for the individual with an ASD to have a private room without a roommate.

It is not unusual for high functioning individuals with ASDs to have an obsession, such as an intense interest in the Civil War. Students with an ASD may only want to enroll in courses that address their obsession, and may consequently perform poorly in courses that do not address their obsession. Because the core curriculum is required for all students, the student with an ASD should be advised to balance his class schedule with low-interest and high-interest courses so that the student can maintain a sufficient grade point average. A reduced course load could also be an accommodation that could help the student.

Conclusion

College can be a rewarding experience as well as a conduit to a rewarding occupation for individuals with ASDs. In fact, some individuals with ASDs have commented that college was the best time of their lives. Although responsibility for succeeding in postsecondary education lies with the student, university faculty and staff can ensure that students with ASDs have equal opportunity to learn by providing reasonable accommodations and supports.

References

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