Supporting College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Presented By:

Marci Laurel, CCC-SLP
Senior Speech Language Pathologist

Kathleen “Mo” Taylor, OTR/L
Senior Program Therapist

Objectives

Participants will have an understanding of:

1. The growing population of students of ASD in the higher education system
2. Characteristics of individuals with ASD
3. Learning differences of individuals with ASD
4. Supports and accommodations for successful learning

More Individuals with ASD Are Going to College...

- There is a dramatic increase in the incidence of Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Current figure is 1 in 110
- Male to female ratio is four to one
Are We Ready?

- Incidence is up from 2-5 in 10,000 in the 1970s
- A marked increase is reported worldwide
- How many students are currently in higher education?
- Colleges are learning how to be ready

The Three Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autistic Disorder

PDD/NOS

Asperger's Syndrome

Autism Spectrum Disorders

- Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders usually demonstrate substantial challenges in three primary areas:
  - Communication
  - Social Relatedness
  - Restricted Interests and Activities
- Autism is seen as a “spectrum disorder” - college students with Autism Spectrum Disorders will likely identify as having “Asperger’s Syndrome” or “High Functioning Autism”
What Makes a Higher Education Institution “Friendly” to a Person with ASD?

• Acceptance of social and learning style differences
• Good support system for residential life
• Easy access to disability support
• Good support system for academic affairs
• Interested faculty and staff

Adapted from Marcia Rubenstein as referenced in The College Finder by Steven R. Antonoff, Ph.D

Brain Differences
(Summarized by Rogers and Dawson, 2010)

• Poor Connectivity - makes it difficult to learn complex behaviors that require integrated function across regions of the brain

• Rapid Growth in Head Size in Early Life - may indicate a lack of “pruning” creating too many nerve cells that are less well organized

Brain Differences cont.
(Summarized by Rogers and Dawson, 2010)

• Differences in the Cerebellum - also affects brain connectivity; related to attention, emotion, cognition and motor functions

• “Social Brain Network Differences” - reduced activity in parts of the brain that process social interaction during social tasks
### Brain Differences cont.  
(Summarized by Rogers and Dawson, 2010)

- **Differences in Amygdala** - possibly related to anxiety, difficulties with emotional regulation and problems understanding social information from faces, voices and gestures
- **Decreased Response of Mirror Neurons** - related to challenges with imitation, nonverbal and verbal communication, empathic reactions and perspective taking
- **Differences in Neurochemistry** - ongoing studies related to brain function and observed behavior

### Some Characteristics of Students with ASD: Social

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty understanding social cues</td>
<td>Can make it hard to work with groups of students or to participate appropriately in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty understanding others’ point of view</td>
<td>Might not be able to tell if professor or other students are becoming frustrated with their behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty knowing how to interact with people in different roles</td>
<td>Might appear disrespectful to other students or university staff and faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty understanding “personal space”</td>
<td>Might stand too far or too close in interaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Some Characteristics of Students with ASD: Communication

| Unusual use of facial expressions and eye contact | Can be interpreted as lack of engagement or boredom                           |
| Unusual tone of voice in conversation            | Can be interpreted as rude or disinterested                                   |
| Limited use of gestures/body language           | Can make it difficult to convey feelings and also relates to difficulty understanding the body language of others |
Communication (continued)

Difficulty participating in back and forth conversation/sharing the floor → Can make it hard to work with other students in small groups or to participate in classroom discussions

Difficulty initiating communication → Can make it hard to ask for help

Difficulty understanding sarcasm or subtle meanings of words → Can impact social interaction in class as well as auditory and reading comprehension

Some Characteristics of Students with ASD:
Repetitive Behaviors/Interest

Might “perseverate” on one thought or idea → Can make it difficult to transition between classroom topics

Might have very intense, single focused hobbies or interests → Can make staying focused on class topic a challenge

Might demonstrate unusual hand movements, especially when under stress → Might appear unusual or be distracting to others in class

Some Characteristics of Students with ASD:
Other Possible Concerns

- Difficulty planning ahead and managing responsibilities and time
- Difficulty with motor planning/awkward motor coordination
- Difficulty understanding goal-setting and steps to achieving them
Other Possible Concerns

- Difficulty keeping track of assignments and due dates
- Difficulty putting all the pieces of learning together into a whole picture
- Difficulty knowing exactly what the professor is asking for

Some Characteristics of Students with ASD: Learning Strengths

- Often uses visual information well for understanding content and demonstrating knowledge
- Might remember information over a long period of time
- Might have a high degree of focus on and knowledge about special areas of interest
- Often able to learn and follow specific rules when told explicitly what is expected
- Can be detailed oriented and highly focused
- Might be highly logical and purposeful
- Often have unique perspectives and sense of humor
Disclosure

- Remember that students need to disclose that they have a disability to receive accommodations
- For students with ASD, this might be especially challenging because of difficulties with self-awareness, communication, and asking for help
- Accommodations also "break the rules"

Special Services

- Most higher education institutions have special services for students with disabilities (under a variety of names)
- Typical accommodations include: note takers, alternative print form, equipment lending, alternative testing setting, extended time, and exam modification
- What additional accommodations might be needed for students with ASD

Accommodations

- In general, it is most helpful for information to be presented in a visual and explicit manner
- Tools need to be structured and organized and presented in a manner that makes sense to the individual
Other Accommodations to Consider

• Reduce sensory distractions such as sitting near air conditioning or heating vents, street noise or flickering lights
• “Location, location, location”
• Encourage testing in alternative environment

Other Accommodations to Consider

• Student might benefit from additional parent involvement for social and academic support
• Talk to student and parents about this possible accommodation
• Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) has to be considered with appropriate forms signed to allow for parent communication when applicable
• Help faculty understand need for continued parent support

“The skills he needs: initiation, self awareness, communication skills, and especially knowing you need help, he doesn’t have by definition.”

“You have to start earlier teaching them to advocate for themselves -- but he wasn’t ready earlier.”

“The student has to go to the teacher, this requires a kind of self awareness that he doesn’t have.”
### How Can Teaching Staff Support Students with ASD?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Concern</th>
<th>Why?</th>
<th>Possible Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does not turn in assignments on time</td>
<td>Difficulty keeping track of specific requirements and due dates (organization)</td>
<td>Provide smaller chunks of information in visual format; check for understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talks too much in class</td>
<td>Difficulty understanding rules of conversation and perspective of others</td>
<td>Agree on signal to use during class that means it is time to stop talking/allow five minutes after class for unfinished questions or comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior, &quot;annoying&quot; to other students</td>
<td>Does not understand social expectations/sensory differences</td>
<td>Identify peer to support student in specific class; write down rules of “respect” for your classroom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

### Do you ever have difficulty turning in assignments on time?

"It is not as much as a due date, as it is the management of my time and my agenda. Though some assignments may not require as much information, I am not good at compiling information into a concise format and making use of a reduced amount to convey a broader message. This takes a lot of time, and it is difficult to estimate the time and understand exactly what the teacher really wants."
Do you ever feel like you talk too much in class?

“Many times, I am uncertain what affect my comment will have on the class. In English I knew what the conversation entailed but it was to my detriment that I conveyed it in too flowery of terms so the point was lost. I knew it was lost because of the teacher’s reactions; she was confused, she wasn’t enthusiastic, and it took a lot of time for her to understand what I was trying to say.”

How Can Teaching Staff Support Students with ASD?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does not collaborate well with a group</th>
<th>Hard to understand social rules/be flexible about incorporating the ideas of others</th>
<th>Assign roles for group members, written directions about project expectations, allowing options for individual work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is not able to demonstrate knowledge on written essay assignments/examinations</td>
<td>Difficulty organizing information on paper and/or focusing on specific relevant facts</td>
<td>Consider permitting student to meet after class to orally clarify answers and/or provide lists of relevant facts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not respond to changes in instruction, assignments or due dates</td>
<td>Has difficulty with change and/or processing verbal information</td>
<td>Supplement oral with written instructions when reviewing information that has previously been provided</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How is it working in a group?

“In Modern History currently I am involved in a group project. It is worth a lot of our grade, other members say I’m doing too much. I am realizing other group presentations are more organized, I need to realize with each group it will be different. I know that with Joe and I we put an organized power point together, but with each group it is different. The problem is we have no rubric, so I’m worried because I’m not sure if we’ve fulfilled the basic requirements. My group wants to do fun activities but at the same time it worries me. I want to take the presentation and do it myself, but then it’s not a group project.”
How Can Teaching Staff Support Students with ASD?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does not collaborate well with a group</td>
<td>Assign roles for group members, written directions about project expectations, allowing options for individual work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard to understand social rules/ be flexible about incorporating the ideas of others</td>
<td>Consider permitting student to meet after class to orally clarify answers and/or provide lists of relevant facts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is not able to demonstrate knowledge on written/essay assignments/examinations</td>
<td>Supplement oral with written instructions when revising information that has previously been provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not respond to changes in instruction, assignments or due dates</td>
<td>Consider permitting student to meet after class to orally clarify answers and/or provide lists of relevant facts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has difficulty with change and/or with processing written information</td>
<td>Consider permitting student to meet after class to orally clarify answers and/or provide lists of relevant facts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What Can Special Services Offer Students with ASD?

| Self expectations are "unrealistic" | Difficulty adjusting expectations based on experience/unable to perceive limitations in comparison to others | Written steps to achieve specific goal with supported self-monitoring/encourage smaller class load (with support to preserve scholarships) as appropriate |
| Problems with hygiene in class | Difficulties with personal organization/understanding the perspective of others | Provide written information about needed hygiene, establish a hygiene routine |
| Late to class/work | Difficulties with organization/following rules that do not seem personally important | Agree to written expectations of class/job performance and update regularly/reinforcement for being on time |

What Can Special Services Offer Students with ASD?

| Needs specific routines to maintain organization and self-regulation/heightened anxiety by small changes in the environment | Preferential assignment of single rooms |
| Difficulty understanding the perspectives of others and using learned social skills throughout the day | Provide opportunity to debrief about social experiences and situations with a key support person |
| Difficulties with organization, understanding time and planning ahead | Provide direct assistance to transfer information from syllabus to calendar or personal digital assistant (PDA) |
Watch This Helpful Guide

- The Office on Autism Research provides “A Professor’s Guide”
- Available to view on-line at:
  - www.researchautism.org/resources/AspergerDVDSeries.asp

Some Resources

- Succeeding in College with Asperger Syndrome by John Harpur, Maria Lawlor and Michael Fitzgerald
- Developing College Skills in Students with Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome by Sarita Freedman
- Navigating College: A Handbook on Self Advocacy developed by The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN)
- The College Finder by Steven R. Antonoff

Special Services in New Mexico

Attached to Handout
**Additional Resources**

The Center for Development & Disability Autism Programs:
[http://cdd.unm.edu/autism/](http://cdd.unm.edu/autism/)  (505) 272-3000

New Mexico Association on Higher Education And Disability (AHEAD)
[http://as2.unm.edu/ahead/index.html](http://as2.unm.edu/ahead/index.html)

---

“There are none of us so well functioning that we do not need others to provide some special conditions at some times to allow us to use our other more competent parts. This applies to every area of our lives.”

Anderson and Milliren, 1983

---

Thank You For Your Participation