SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH AUTISM IN THE UNIVERSITY: ACCESS AND INCLUSION IN THE CLASSROOM AND UNIVERSITY LIFE

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Learning Outcomes

- Discuss characteristics of college students with ASD
- Identify common concerns for college-capable young adults with ASD
- Review strategies for supporting students with ASD in college

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

- Developmental disability
- Two core areas of impairment
  - Social communication
  - Repetitive behaviors and restrictive interests
- Complex behavioral, neurological and genetic features

Diagnostic Changes

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 diagnoses (Asperger’s, Autism, PDD-NOS)</td>
<td>1 diagnosis ASD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 areas of impairment (social, language, behaviors)</td>
<td>2 areas of impairment (social communication and repetitive/ restrictive behaviors)</td>
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<tr>
<td>No severity rating</td>
<td>3 severity ratings</td>
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<tr>
<td>No “qualifiers”</td>
<td>Several qualifiers (language delay, cognitive impairment)</td>
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ASD Characteristics: What’s Important?

- Social communication impairments
- Repetitive and restrictive behaviors
- Developmental delays and developmental differences
- Executive function impairments
- Emotion regulation impairments
- Adaptive behavior delays

Associated Features and Co-morbidities

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Attention problems
- Difficulties with handwriting and/or written expression
- Poor organization
- Low motivation for work
- Limited goal-setting
- Poor self-advocacy skills
- Aggression and/or anger management

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Other Characteristics
- Wide range of cognitive abilities
- "Splintered" developmental profile
- Social and emotional immaturity
- Weak pragmatic language skills
- Low coping skills and frustration tolerance
- Difficulty in group situations

"Behaviors" of a College Student with ASD
- Incessant question asking
- Blurring out
- An 'elitist' attitude
- Limited participation
- Social isolation
- Poor home skills
- Poor hygiene
- Directive, bossy
- Seems to not be paying attention
- Highly literal; difficulty with sarcasm and jokes
- Frequent social faux-pas
- Not seeking assistance
- Rude to others
- "Brilliance" without common sense

Common Impairment: Social Communication
- Challenged Social Communicator
  - Thinks cognitive impairment, limited verbal abilities
- Emerging Social Communicator
  - Thinks clearly "different" but progressing towards independence
- Nuance Challenged Social Communicator
  - Thinks appears "typical" but makes "surprising" errors
- Neurotypical

Profiles: Emerging SC
- Mild verbal language delays may persist; sometimes more significant
- Emotional vocabulary is delayed compared to verbal abilities
- Ability to tell a story - verbally or written - is weak compared to verbal language
- Often rote social behaviors; unable to recognize the need to adapt; social rules and expectations are taught concretely
- Awkward; odd; aloof

Profiles: Emerging SC, cont'd
- Group based learning is a struggle but can be successful with classroom modifications, accommodations, visual supports and behavior plans
- Limited attention given to Theory of Mind; more concerned about "global" expectations and routines
- Naïve; sometimes safety concerns; immature
- Independence is delayed but progressing

Profiles: Nuance Challenged SC
- In younger years detail focused, competitive, rules focused, fairness focused, perfectionistic; cognitive ability helps to overcome social challenges
- Aware of others and can demonstrate some theory of mind, but challenged by how to use this information
- This is particularly difficult in "real time" - e.g., seeing that someone looks bored and changing the topic
- Strong academic talents with limited academic outputs due to executive functioning challenges
- Emerging self-awareness can lead to increased risk of anxiety and depression
- "Others" respond negatively to this group
High School vs. College

- IEPs and 504 plans
- IDEA
- Network of supports
- Case managers
- Modifications (e.g., written expression)

College

- Letter of accommodations
- ADA
- Expectation of independence
- Self-advocacy
- Emphasis on writing ability and written communication

Some other “differences”

- Structure
- Grading rubrics
- Critical thinking skills; level of “abstractness”
- Quantity of studying
- Social aspects of academic work
- Review and reminders by teachers
- Access to services (e.g., speech therapy)
- Independent living expectations

High School

From the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 . . .

- Of students with ASD . . .
  - 20% do not respond to questions orally
  - 50% do not present to class or to groups
  - 20% do not work with peers or in groups
  - 67% have an individualized and specialized curriculum
  - 90% receive accommodations or modifications (e.g., extended time, alternative assignments)
  - 80% receive learning support (e.g., paraphrasing), 57% use assistive technology, and 70% receive “related services” (e.g., speech therapy, behavioral services, psychological services)

Academic Concerns

- Difficulty understanding material
- Limited motivation for specific subjects
- Challenges with writing and written expression
- Attendance and engagement during class

- Organization
- Group work
- “Abstract” assignments
- Breaking tasks down
- Visual learners
- Time management
- Completing and turning in assignments

Social Concerns

- Connecting to others
- How to make friends
- Joining special interest groups, clubs, activities
- Inappropriate social behavior
- Disclosure
- “Hidden” social rules
- Perspective taking
- “Social thinking” deficits
Mental Health Concerns

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Obsessions and perseverations
- Anger management
- Emotional coping skills
- Stress management
- Loneliness

Life Skills and Adaptive Behavior Concerns

- Living with a roommate; living independently
- Cleanliness; home-living skills
- Hygiene
- Self-advocacy
- Self-determination
- Community participation and use
- Leisure activities
- Safety behaviors

Other “Life” Skills

- Sexual health
- Relationships, dating, consent
- Appropriate internet use and behavior
- Diet, nutrition, exercise
- Employment, resumes, interview skills
- Knowledge of legal system
- Interactions with community professionals

Transition Skills

- Causal Capacity Skills
  - Goal setting, choice making, decision making, problem solving, attribution
- Intrapersonal Capacity Skills
  - Emotional self-regulation, self-advocacy, behavioral self-management, perception of control, self-awareness
- Adaptive Behavior Skills
  - Independent living, social competency, behavioral responsibility

Outcomes for young adults with ASD?

- Few adults with ASD live independently
  - Believed to be better for those with higher cognitive abilities; mixed results
- Limited social participation after high school
- ASD symptoms tend to persist into adulthood
- Many do not attempt PSE and many do not find employment
- Provision of services is reduced after high school

Concerns and Goals

- College students with ASD will often have a great number of strengths alongside some “surprising” skill deficits
- Goals may come from a wide array of domains
- Important to not make assumptions about skillsets
  - Avoids “He should know better!”
Resources on a College Campus

- Office of Disability Services
- Student Health Center
- Counseling and Mental Health Services
- Health Promotion
- Academic and Writing Centers
- Tutoring Services
- Student Activity Organizations
- Residence Life
- Career Center
- Emory Autism Center!

General Strategies

- Directly connect to campus resources (e.g., tutoring, student organizations, career services)
- Use visual supports and teaching methods
- Engage in task analysis
- Be as concrete as possible
- Foster regular contact with peers and instructors
- Use a positive behavioral approach
- Focus on self-management and self-reinforcement
- Encourage participation but don’t push too hard
- Create proactive plans
- Be patient
- Implement mentoring programs
- Create therapy groups for learning social-cognitive and emotional management groups
- Direct instruction of skills
- Promote awareness, offer trainings to campus community

Be student-centered and strengths-based

- Draw on student strengths and interests to create strategies and solutions
- Allow students to set their own goals: “What do you wish was a little different?”
- Highlight the positives and successes for our students
  - In some cases, others have been focused on shortcomings and weaknesses
  - In other cases, this may be the first time, they have experienced academic and/or social challenges

Academic Accommodations

- Many students with ASD struggle with executive functioning challenges similar to students with ADHD or learning disabilities and can benefit from accommodations
  - Extended time for assignments and tests
  - Note-takers or receiving lecture notes ahead of time
  - Quiet testing environment
  - Participation modifications
  - Priority registration
  - Reduced course load
  - Others as needed

Self-Advocacy

- A process of getting your needs and wants met
- Needs to be explicitly taught
- Self-assessing a situation and then speaking for themselves to get their needs met
- Promote dependency and lack of independence
- The ASD individual may assume that since they know what they want, everyone else does too
- Paradox #1: In order to teach self-advocacy, we must be their advocates
- Paradox #2: the belief that “independence” means doing everything on your own

Self-advocacy example: Asking for Help

- Recognize the problem
- Identify the appropriate resource
- Ask for help
- Be “helpful” while being helped
- Express gratitude
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-advocacy and Self-awareness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many of our students with ASD have had limited experience with taking the initiative to approach instructors about concerns, needs, supports, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reach out to the student (privately) — create a safe space for discussion and problem solving</td>
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<td>Connect to resources directly</td>
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<th>Self-Disclosure</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fear of stigma</td>
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<td>Tends to gain acceptance and understanding</td>
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<td>Sensitive issue for many</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others may need to be taught boundaries and privacy issues</td>
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<tr>
<th>&quot;Unidentified&quot; Students</th>
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<tr>
<td>Many students with ASD in college may not have an official diagnosis, they may be &quot;misdiagnosed&quot;; or they may not have sought out any services</td>
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<td>Be discrete — engage student in a discussion about concerns</td>
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<td>Be solution-focused, rather than label-focused</td>
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<td>Connect student to existing campus supports (e.g., ASDR, CAPS, Emory Autism Center, etc.)</td>
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<th>Classroom Strategies</th>
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<td>Build rapport — take time to get to know the student, learn about interests and strengths</td>
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<td>Encourage use of office hours</td>
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<td>Consider increasing visual presentation of information</td>
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<tr>
<td>If student has academic accommodations, meet with student to understand what supports are helpful and why</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allow for breaks and self-regulation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create subtle non-verbal cues for self-management</td>
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<th>Attendance and Participation</th>
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<td>If attendance is &quot;optional&quot; (and attendance is poor), explain why attendance is important and concrete consequences for not attending</td>
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<td>If attendance is mandatory, explain the concrete behaviors associated with attendance (arrive on time, stay throughout, participation expectations, sign-in, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>If student does not participate, work with the student to learn &quot;safe and simple&quot; means of participating</td>
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<tr>
<td>If student participates &quot;too much&quot;, coordinate with student to create concrete expectations and subtle cues for limiting participation</td>
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<tr>
<th>Participation in Group Work</th>
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<tr>
<td>Many students have difficulty with group work</td>
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<td>As appropriate, allow for modification</td>
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<td>Define individual roles within the group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highlight student strengths</td>
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<tr>
<td>Help with matching student to team members</td>
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Classroom Strategies

- Unusual or "disruptive" behaviors
  - Meet with student to learn about self-awareness and potential reasons for the behavior
  - Set clear expectations in a positive way without judgement and consequences
  - Collaborate with student to create a "cue" for regulating or managing behavior
  - Encourage taking a short break

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Classroom Strategies

- Completion of Assignments
  - Connect student to Disability Services and other academic supports (e.g., writing center, tutors)
  - Student may need help with breaking down long-term or abstract assignments into manageable components
  - Provide reminders beyond the syllabus
  - Create opportunities for flexibility – allow for assignments to come in late (with clear grading consequences)

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Striving for Inclusion

To truly be an inclusive environment for students with ASD, we have to think about embedding structured supports for teaching skills that may be lacking

All members of the campus community should be engaged in supporting our students – collaboration is key!

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Strategies for Students

Skill deficit strategies

- Task analysis break the skill down into very small discrete behaviors, create a "checklist", model and practice doing the skill
- Utilize visual learning strengths – use pictures, watch videos
- Engage in data collection and self-monitoring
- Create age-appropriate reward systems
- Goal attainment should be student-led

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Self-monitoring

- Awareness of one's own behavior
- Tallying behaviors during class
- Graphing and setting behavioral goals
- Self-evaluation of behaviors
- Tie into behavior and reinforcement systems

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Organization and Time Management

- Checklists and other visual supports
- Use of daily planners or web-based calendars
- Review weekly schedule; ownership of setting schedules
- Use technology
- Practice awareness of time
- Color-coded organizational systems
- Schedule time for organization
- Find the motivator!

Social strategies for students with ASD

- Connect to special interest groups
- Work with an individual counselor to foster disclosure and self-advocacy skills
- Participate in social learning groups when possible
- Read books and web-based resources to learn about common social and employment rules and expectations

Potential Campus-wide Initiatives

- Peer mentoring
- Social interaction intervention groups
- First year seminar

Peer Mentoring

- Trained volunteers meet regularly with students with ASD (e.g., weekly)
- Progress monitoring across academic, socialization, mental health, and life skills
- Guidance on common, practical strategies; referrals to campus and community resources
- Supervision of mentors
- Supplemented with didactic and interactive social skills and social thinking learning opportunities
- "Promising" evidence-based practice

Peer Mentoring – Creating a Program

Where the Program is Housed
- Office of Disability Services
- Academic Affairs
- Counseling/Psychological Services
- College of Education
- Stand alone

Where to Recruit Mentors
- Volunteer organizations
- Department of Psychology
- Health and Helping Fields Departments
- Existing mentoring programs and initiatives
- Residence Life

Peer Mentoring – Training and Supervision

- ASD characteristics, similarities with typical peers, and general strategies
- Emphasis on rapport building, strengths focus, goal setting, and accountability
- Careful review and monitoring of mentor roles and boundaries
- Ongoing training and supervision
Peer Mentoring - Benefits

Benefits to students with ASD
- Opportunity for social interaction and “healing”
- Access to “model” of appropriate social communication skills
- Access to “common sense” strategies and guidance
- Connection to additional peers
- Progress monitoring while promoting independence
- Catch challenges before they are “crises”

Benefits to Peers
- Outreach and service to campus community
- Opportunity to work with unique personalities
- “Teaching” promotes development of expertise
- Increase knowledge of campus resources and staff

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Social Strategies and Recommendations

- Social skills and social thinking groups
  - Include non-diagnosed peers as appropriate
  - Different from support group (but this is important, too)
  - Not the same needs as social anxiety
- Special interest groups, clubs, student organizations
  - Autism specific student groups
- Combination of direct instruction and natural learning opportunities

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“Social Thinking”

- Understanding the relationship between behavior, thoughts, feelings, and responses
- Perspective taking and theory of mind
- Anticipating social norms and “expected” behavior in “shared space”
- Developing social-cognitive flexibility and expanding “black and white” thinking

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Freshman/First Year Seminar

“Typical” Arrangement
- Understanding yourself and goal setting
- Understanding your learning and work styles, study strategies
- Working in groups
- Leadership and engagement
- Career research and resume building (12 sessions)
- Special Topics (3 sessions)
- Using media and information resources

Mentorship
- Longer on self-awareness
- Use visual and concrete strategies
- Teach analysis for “working in groups”, provide concrete rules and rules for group work
- Use “special topics” for “social thinking” skills
- Get out of the classroom; visit campus resources and departments
- Limit enrollments; include a few undiagnosed peer leaders
- Focus on executive functioning, strategies and emotion regulation

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Mental Health/Counseling, cont’d

- Directly connect students to outside referrals and resources as necessary and appropriate
- Use concrete and visual strategies
- Arrange interdisciplinary, team-based goal planning meetings, including disability service provider, academic advisor, peer mentors, parents, and other stakeholders

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Mental health support staff

- Monitor students presenting with anxiety or depression and assess for ASD
- Be open to long-term treatment models
- Partner individual psychotherapy with group therapy and peer mentors
- Focus on self-awareness and understanding ASD diagnosis
  - Assess (and help students understand) individual strengths, interests, challenges, and helpful strategies
- Be patient and take time to build rapport

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Modifications to “traditional” CBT

- Include disorder-specific goals along with comorbidities
- Emphasis on concrete and visual strategies
- Use interests and “preoccupations” to enhance motivation
- Parental involvement

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Expectations Strategy

**Situation:** Meeting with professor after class to give letter of accommodations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best-case (and plausible) scenario</th>
<th>Most likely scenario</th>
<th>Least likely scenario</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professor accepts letter of accommodations and mentions that he/she has worked with students with ASD in the past; offers support as a “safe person” to come and discuss challenges and successes</td>
<td>Professor is tense, brief, and makes comment that he/she will accept the letter but that the student will still have to work hard to earn a good grade in the class; makes negative or ignorant assumptions about the student</td>
<td>Professor accepts the letter of accommodations and reminds student that he/she will have to remind the professor about specific accommodations in which accommodations are requested to be assessed</td>
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Residence Life

- Engage family in proactive planning
- Provide a safe space for stress management and calming down
- Work with the student to address sensory challenges
- When in crisis, limit physical contact and verbal input
- Review clear and concrete rules with students; create visual supports

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Health Promotion

- Collaborate with Office of Disability Services in addition to residence life
- Provide ASD-specific training and education on important health topics (e.g., stress management, diet/nutrition, exercise, sexual health, healthy relationships and consent, alcohol and other drug use, violence prevention, etc.)
- Use social norms strategies to present behavioral norms
- Connect student leaders to Office of Disability Services for peer mentoring roles

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Clinical Health Services Staff

- Recognize behavior as communication
- Be patient with student intakes; offer alternative locations for intakes and interviews
- Be aware of sensory challenges
- Use open-ended and response choice formats for interviews
- Include campus staff and providers who are particularly knowledgeable about ASD

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Understanding ASD in College

**ASD**

- Visual, sensory, positive behavior approaches, high structure, direct instruction, repeated practice, connect to support services

Strengths
- Concrete, attention to detail, rule-bound, unique, passion for specific interests

Interests
- Special interests, computers, creativity, technology, facts, fine arts

Challenges
- Causal capacity skills, interpersonal skills, adaptive behaviors, self-advocacy

Strategies
- Visual, sensory, positive behavior approaches, high structure, direct instruction, repeated practice, connect to support services

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Colleges and Universities with ASD-specific Programs

- Marshall University/ West Virginia
- University of Alabama
- Western Kentucky University
- Rutgers University
- Pace University
- Carnegie Mellon
- Rochester Institute of Technology
- Virginia Tech
- Cal Tech
- Georgia Tech

Resources and Additional Information

- Autism Speaks Transition Toolkit
- Organization for Autism Research Transition Guide
- College Internship Program
- Rochester Institute of Technology: Guide to ASD in Higher Education
- Autistic Self-Advocacy Network: Navigating College Handbook

What do “transition” programs do?

Example: College Internship Program

- Academic advising
- Study hall
- Tutoring
- Career counseling and strategies
- Cooking, shopping and life skills instruction
- “Health club”
- Individual therapy
- Social thinking groups
- Theory of mind groups
- Executive functioning groups
- Sensory understanding and intervention

Take-aways

- Avoid the assumption that “unexpected” behavior is intentional or willful — instead, get to know the student and engage in positive problem solving and setting concrete expectations
- Connect students with ASD to campus resources
- Emory students with ASD have tremendous gifts and talents — they have great potential but also need support: Take an active and positive role in their success!

Contact Information

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