

Understanding College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) refers to individuals who have differences in social-communication and behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The autism spectrum includes people who might identify themselves as having Asperger Syndrome. These individuals are likely to have average to above average intellectual ability and strong verbal skills, while also having learning differences, and differences in how they communicate and relate to others socially.

- Social-communication differences may occur in the areas of developing and maintaining relationships, understanding nonverbal communication, and interpreting the perspectives and emotions of others.
- Behavioral differences may include repetitive patterns of behavior, difficulties with change, intense focus on interest areas, and unusual reactions to stimuli in the environment.

About ASD

- ASD is a neurobiological disorder
- The current prevalence of ASD is 1 in 54 children; Boys are four times more likely to be identified than girls (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2020)
- Many college students with ASD also report Anxiety Disorders, Depression or other mental health diagnoses (Gelbar, Smith & Reichow, 2014; Jackson, Hart, Brown & Volkmar, 2018)
- Individuals with ASD have many unique strengths and skills that, with support, can facilitate academic and employment success

Supporting ALL Students in Classroom Learning

As the prevalence of ASD continues to rise, it is likely there will be increasing numbers of students with ASD participating in university classrooms. Although students with ASD have specific learning and social-communication differences that can affect their performance, there are many opportunities for college faculty to provide universal supports that improve learning. Rather than focusing on strategies that only support students with autism spectrum disorder, we have identified strategies that encourage engagement and learning for all students. Understanding and valuing the diversity of student backgrounds, characteristics, and learning differences can help us build richer, more inclusive universities that prepare all students to be life-long learners and engage successfully in their future careers and communities.

Learning and Social-Communication Differences of Students with ASD

- Individuals with ASD are often described as concrete thinkers. They may interpret information literally and may misunderstand messages that are hidden, or that are generally understood based on nonverbal and contextual information.
 - Use concrete language whenever possible.
 - Do not rely on nonverbal cues to convey meaning. Whenever possible, pair nonverbals with verbal and written information to explain or emphasize important points.
 - Explain hidden messages or clarify unwritten guidelines (e.g., expectations for how much each student should plan to contribute to large group discussions, expectations for how to participate in pair work during class).
- Students with ASD may have received learning supports in K-12 schooling that did not require self-advocacy skills. This may result in them not taking advantage of office hours or not understanding how to advocate for their needs.
 - Reach out to students who might benefit from support and encourage them to meet with you.
 - Ask students what supports they need.
 - When meeting with students, write down important feedback, since they may not always remember verbal information, especially if they are anxious during the meeting.
 - Work with the student to break down larger tasks into incremental steps.
- Students with ASD typically have strengths in visual processing, and may not respond as successfully to verbally presented information. They also may not understand the dynamics of large group discussions.
 - Use visuals to support learning for all students.
 - Provide regular, active student engagement opportunities to help students elaborate on, and process content provided during lectures as well as assess their own learning.
 - Create boundaries for discussion, such as, “I would like to hear ideas from three different students,” “everyone should write down one idea, and then we will have two students share with the group.”
- Students with ASD may have differences in how they interpret verbal and nonverbal communication from peers. Some students may believe that the group needs to use their ideas if they are going to be successful in the group task. Others might lack experience working in a group or be intimidated by the complexity of the social dynamics. Still others might have poor organizational skills which interfere with their performance in group work.
 - Offer guidance on group behavior making it clear that everyone plays different roles within group projects, and that no one person should contribute all the ideas.
 - Provide check-ins with groups to support effective group process.
 - Provide guidelines to help organize group work so that students have timelines for each step (e.g., first meeting during this week, first draft complete by this date).
- Individuals with ASD have a strong ability to remember details. Sometimes they may not fully understand the larger context of assignments or content, such as how details are combined to form a big picture or how course content fits within a field of study.

- Create specific guidelines to support all students in understanding expectations for the course (e.g., page length, number of paragraphs).
- Many students tend to over-focus on details, which is evidenced when students ask questions such as “will this be on the test?” without understanding the larger learning objectives of college courses. Provide reminders about how smaller details fit within a larger context of learning, and how one course fits within a field or major. Help students see the application of content to future careers.

Resources and Strategies for University Faculty:

- [Faculty Focus: Teaching College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders](#) (Ornellas, 2015)
- [Faculty Tips for Effectively Teaching Students Diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders](#) Kent State University
- [Tips for Supporting Discussions](#) Rochester Institute of Technology
- [A Spectrum of Possibility: Tips for Professors of College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#) Center on Transition, Virginia Commonwealth University
- [Video: Supporting College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders](#) Pace University’s OASIS program

References:

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: Author.
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. \(2020\). Autism and developmental disabilities monitoring \(ADDM\) network](#). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Gelbar, N.W., Smith, I. & Reichow, B. (2014). Systematic review of articles describing experience and supports of individuals with autism enrolled in college and university programs. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 44, 2593-2601.
- Jackson, S. L. J., Hart, L., Brown, J. T., & Volkmar, F. R. (2018). Brief report: Self-reported academic, social, and mental health experiences of post-secondary students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 48(3), 643–650. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3315-x>.