

Supporting Students with ASD in Higher Education

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With the increase in the incidence of ASD, more attention has been focused on individuals with ASD in higher education settings. High school personnel are working to learn how to help students be ready for success in higher education. Colleges are learning how to support students with ASD as they transition to the exciting possibilities in a higher education setting.

Social communication characteristics of ASD can sometimes create challenges in the higher education setting. For example, difficulties related to:

- ⇒ Understanding social cues
- ⇒ Understanding the point of view of other people
- ⇒ Using and understanding nonverbal communication
- ⇒ Initiating communication, including asking for help
- ⇒ Understanding abstract language

Restricted or repetitive behaviors may also be problematic, including:

- ⇒ Perseveration on one thought or idea
- ⇒ Unusual body movements, especially when under stress

Individuals with ASD might struggle with planning, organization and skills for independent living. For example, difficulties related to:

- ⇒ Keeping track of important dates
- ⇒ Planning for long term projects
- ⇒ Turning work in on time

People with ASD also have strengths that will serve them well in a higher education setting!
Individuals with ASD:

- ⇒ Often use visual information well for understanding content and demonstrating knowledge
- ⇒ Might do well remembering information learned
- ⇒ Might have a high degree of focus and knowledge in special areas of interest
- ⇒ Often are able to learn and follow rules that are explained
- ⇒ Can be detailed oriented and focused on a topic
- ⇒ Offer unique perspectives

Receiving support in higher education settings

Students in higher education must disclose that they have a disability in order to receive support services :

- ⇒ This can be a challenge when there are difficulties with self-awareness, communication and asking for help
- ⇒ Accommodations offered might make the student uncomfortable because they “break the rules” as they understand them

What makes a higher education facility friendly for people with ASD?

- ⇒ Acceptance of social and learning style differences
- ⇒ Strong support system for residential life
- ⇒ Easy access to disability support services
- ⇒ Good system for academic support
- ⇒ Interested faculty and staff

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

People will be more successful in Higher Education if they are independent in these skills:

LIVING

1. Getting up by an alarm clock
2. Performing hygiene skills adequately without reminders
3. Organizing space for functional use
4. Abiding by the housing rules and recognizing that it is the RA's job to enforce the rules for others
5. Money management

ACADEMICS

1. Accurately transferring written information from the board, computer, or syllabus to a calendar or planner and then using (and abiding by) the calendar, schedule, planner, or agenda
2. Getting to class, appointments, and meetings on time
3. Understanding professors are in charge and then doing what they ask
4. Going to the professor's office hours with questions
5. Calling an identified academic support person when needed

SOCIAL

1. Recognizing safe environments and people, and knowing what to do if not feeling safe
2. Contacting a social support person to help problem solve situations
3. Attending supported/organized social events that are of interest
4. Appropriately using social media
5. Initiating social plan

Resources:

- Autism Speaks, <http://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/resource-library/post-secondary-education-resources>
- OAR, Organization for Autism Research <https://researchautism.org/resources/a-guide-for-transition-to-adulthood/>
- 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)
- Students with Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for College Personnel by Lorraine E. Wolf, Jane Thierfeld Brown, G. Ruth Kukiela Bork

About the Author (s): **Kathleen Mo Taylor** is an OT and **Marci Laurel** is an SLP working at the University of New Mexico, Center for Development and Disability, Autism Programs. As the children that they have known over the years grow up, they have become increasingly interested in opportunities for higher education for individuals with ASD.

For more information about this resource or to inquire about the Autism Programs call **(505) 272-1852** or **1-800-270-1861**

<https://cdd.health.unm.edu/autismportal/>



How Can *Educators* Support Students with ASD?

<u>Area of Concern</u>	<u>Why?</u>	<u>Possible Support</u>
Does not turn in assignments on time	Difficulty keeping track of specific requirements and due dates (organization)	Provide smaller chunks of information in visual format Check for understanding
Talks too much in class	Difficulty understanding rules of conversation and perspective of others	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 or specific time during office hours
Behaviors annoying to other students	Does not understand social expectations Differences in the way sensory information is used and processed	Identify peer to support student in specific class; write down rules of respect for your classroom
Does not collaborate well with a group	Hard to understand social rules/be flexible about incorporating the ideas of others	Assign roles for group members; written directions about project expectations and/or allowing options for individual work
Is not able to demonstrate knowledge through written assignments/examinations	Difficulty organizing information on paper and/or focusing on relevant facts	Consider permitting student to meet after class to orally clarify answers and/or provide lists of relevant facts
Does not respond to changes in instruction, assignments or due dates	Has difficulty with change and/or processing verbal information	Supplement oral with written instructions when revising information that has previously been provided

How Can *Special Services* Support Students with ASD?

<u>Area of Concern</u>	<u>Why?</u>	<u>Possible Support</u>
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)
Problems with hygiene	Difficulties with personal organization and, or 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 Provide reinforcement for being on time
Has difficulty maintaining study and sleep schedule while living with a room mate	Needs specific routines to maintain organization and self-regulation Small changes in the environment may lead to heightened anxiety	Preferential assignment of single rooms; brainstorm alternative housing
Overwhelmed by number of social relationships	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 Refer to outside therapist or counselor
Is not able to translate a syllabus into a plan for work that needs to be completed or planned	Difficulties with organization, understanding time and planning ahead	Provide direct assistance to transfer information from syllabus to calendar or personal digital assistant (PDA)