

Studentaffairs.com Virtual Case Study: Autistic Students



Presented by: Makana A. L. Agcaoili, Gaby L. Preciado, Michelle M.
Wallace

**How do we support the
growing population of
Autistic Students on our
campus?**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Task Force

- Dean of Students
- Director of Student Disability Services
- Director of Residence Life
- Director of Student Activities
- Director of Counseling Services
- One Faculty Member
- One or more Autistic Student(s)

**Why is supporting Autistic students important
in higher education?**

Neurodiversity

“...neurodiversity is the idea that neurological differences like autism and ADHD are the result of normal, natural variation in the human genome.” (Robison, 2017)

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

“Autism is a neurological variation that occurs in about one percent of the population and is classified as a developmental disability” (Autistic Advocacy, 2017)

Challenges That Autistic Students Face

- Difficulty engaging in reciprocal social interaction and relationship development
- Problems maintaining conversation in social settings
- Perseverative or obsessive thought patterns
- Fixated or restricted behaviors and interests
- Difficulty interpreting nonverbal cues or the perspective of others.
- Perceived as having difficulty in behaving in age and interpersonally appropriate ways
- Difficulty developing a meaningful personal understanding of ASD.
- Increased probability of experiencing anxiety and/or depression

What is the significance of these challenges within the context of higher education?

- Higher education is a space that traditionally requires social interaction, and this can pose a challenge for individuals who are perceived as having “awkward” or “unconventional” social skills
 - That is to say, students who are unable to hold conversations and pick up on social cues in ways that are deemed “normal” are often othered, ignored and left feeling isolated.
- In higher education, students are encouraged to take on the perspectives of others and have an open mind to new ideas
 - This expectation can pose challenges for autistic students who may be unable to see the perspective of others
- Issues of mental health are a heavily stigmatized concept for college students and depending on the social identities that a student holds, the stigma of mental health issues can become even deeper. Moreover, mental health and counseling services are varied across institutions of higher education and the support a student is seeking may not even exist on their campus.

Three Approaches to understanding disability

- **Functional Limitations Framework**
 - Focuses on individual and biological limitations
 - Views student(s) as powerless and in need of help in navigating their environment
 - Views disability and the individual as an “issue” rather than the inaccessible structures in place
- **Minority Group Framework**
 - Views disability as best understood by membership in a minority group
 - Builds on the deficit model both erasing difference across disability identities, and setting disability groups up apart from able bodied “norm”
 - Continues the narrative that people with a disability need “help” adapting to society
- **Social Construction Framework**
 - Understands that disability has traditionally been a label created by those without disability (Jones 1996)
 - Deconstructs societal structures, narratives, and barriers that create what is perceived as disability
 - Views disability justice as shared responsibility of all rather than focusing on the individual or a single minority group

**It is not student's responsibility to
to be integrated into the university.
It is the university's responsibility to
create access for students with ASD
to succeed.**

How do we use intersectionality to eliminate ableist barriers in our university on personal/social/academic/systemic levels?

What is intersectionality and why is important?

Intersectionality describes the idea that interlocking systems of oppression shape our experiences in everyday life and compound/complicate one another.

These systems (i.e. racism, sexism, genderism, ableism, heteronormativity, xenophobia, homophobia, classism etc.) give certain identities power within society (white, cisgender, male, wealthy, able-bodied, christian, citizen etc.), and therefore denies power to those who do not hold dominant identities.

(Collins, P. H., & Bilge S., 2016)

Historically, institutions of higher education have denied access to individuals who hold marginalized identities, in explicit, systemic and structural ways. We can use intersectionality as a tool to identify the ways in which systems of oppression have ingrained themselves within institutions of higher education and barred certain populations from entering the space, including students with disabilities. And even when these individuals are granted access to higher education, their experiences are heavily influenced by systems of oppression that have permeated institutional practices. Intersectionality can propel us forward in breaking down these barriers to create an inclusive and supportive environment for all students.

How we can add an intersectional lens to our approach?

We must identify and center the ways that ableism intersects with other systems of oppression in our work.

Example: Intersection of Racism and Ableism

- Increase in Black and Latinx students with ASD (Pinder-Amaker, 2014)
 - Diagnosed at older ages than white counterparts
 - Linked to issues of class and access to resources, which is also linked to racism
 - African American students 3 times as likely to be placed in “special education” courses in K-12 compared to whites. (Pinder-Amaker, 2014)
-

How do we actively combat these systems of oppression in our work to support ASD students?

- Provide free services to students
 - Offer screenings for Students of Color (who may not know that they have ASD)
 - Inclusive conversations about the experiences of ASD students
 - Communication between administrators and student leaders
 - Programming that is tailored to students with ASD
 - Smaller spaces/groups
 - Providing students with information regarding their rights to accommodations and resources
-

Our Proposal

Hire a coordinator of ASD
Initiatives

Coordinator of ASD Initiatives

- Supervised by the Director of the Office of Student Disability Services
- Job Responsibilities
 - Apply to grants and other funding sources for the foundation/maintenance of a ASD Institution
 - Work with on-campus and off-campus partners to implement educational programs
 - Plan developmental support initiatives for students with ASD
 - Serve as a member on the ASD Task Force
- Qualifications
 - Bachelor degree in any field (Masters preferred).
 - Experience working with students with disabilities.
 - History of successful grant writing/fundraising.
- **Annual Salary: \$40,000**
 - The cost of a single out-of-state student's yearly tuition.

Potential actions rooted in research

Student Services

(Rochester Institute of Technology, 2014)

- Student Activities
 - Focused Spring Breaks
 - Coaching/Mentorships
 - Social Programming
 - Student Empowerment
 - Parent Relations
 - Empower and Educate Parents
 - Campus Climate
 - Education on ASD
 - Tutoring
 - Recurring Appointments
 - Admissions
 - Pre-College Workshops
-

Potential actions rooted in research

Residence Life

(Rochester Institute of Technology, 2014)

(Leestma, 2015)

- ASD specific Living Learning Communities (LLC)
 - Live-In Mentors, Tutors, Counselors, and specially trained Resident Assistant(s)
 - Individualized Rooms
 - Sensory Escape Rooms
-

Potential actions rooted in research

Faculty

(Rochester Institute of Technology, 2014)

- Clear and concrete instructions and syllabi
 - Structured roles for group discussions
 - Disability liaison for each academic department
-

What can we be doing on our campus?

- Implementation of a task force to conduct search for ASD Initiatives Coordinator and to continue working to support ASD students
 - Secure funding to support programming and initiatives for ASD students
 - Increased partnerships between student affairs, academic affairs, family members, off-campus services, and students leading to more conversations around ASD.
-

References:

Autistic Self Advocacy Network. Retrieved February 17, 2017, from <http://autisticadvocacy.org/>

Cai, R. Y., & Richdale, A. L. (2015). Educational Experiences and Needs of Higher Education Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 46(1), 31-41. doi:10.1007/s10803-015-2535-1

Collins, P.H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Cullen, J. A. (2015). The Needs of College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Asperger's Syndrome. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 28(1), 89-101.

Gibbons, M. M., Cihak, D. F., Mynatt, B., & Wilhoit, B. E. (2015). Faculty and Student Attitudes toward Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities and Autism. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 28(2), 149-162.

Hees, V. V., Moyson, T., & Roeyers, H. (2014). Higher Education Experiences of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Challenges, Benefits and Support Needs. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 45(6), 1673-1688. doi:10.1007/s10803-014-2324-2

Hoffman, J. (2016, November 19). Along the Autism Spectrum, a Path Through Campus Life. Retrieved February 18, 2017, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/health/autism-spectrum-college.html? r=0>

References Cont:

Jones, S. R. (1996). Toward inclusive theory: Disability as social construction. *NASPA journal*, 33(4), 347-354.

Leestma, D. P. (2015). *Designing for the spectrum: An educational model for the autistic user*. University of Maryland, College Park.

Robison, J. E. What is Neurodiversity? Retrieved February 18, 2017, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/my-life-aspergers/201310/what-is-neurodiversity>

Rochester Institute of Technology. (2014). *Emerging practices for supporting students on the autism spectrum in higher education: A guide for higher education professionals*. Rochester, New York.

Sayman, D. M. (2015). I still need my security teddy bear: Experiences of an individual with autism spectrum disorder in higher education. *The Learning Assistance Review*, 20(1), 77-98.

Williams, L. B. (2016). Student Life on the Autism Spectrum: Helping to Build a More Inclusive Campus. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 48(4), 48-54. doi:10.1080/00091383.2016.1198187