
Stage Fright: A Case Study for Helping Undergraduate Students on the Autism Spectrum

Team Leader: David Raymond

— Members: Hilda Rojas-Duarte & Jen Zarate —

Western Illinois University--College Student Personnel Graduate Program

<<The Case>>

Ever since high school you have loved going to Broadway. It didn't matter if the show you saw was an extravagant, high-stepping musical; a laugh out loud comedy; or a contemplative drama. Now, as a Dean of Students within a reasonable commute to New York City you have been able to satisfy your theatrical cravings.

One of the productions you recently attended was a staging of the book, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*. You remember, when you first read the book, you were taken with the story of a young boy, on the autism spectrum, who sets out to solve the murder of his neighbor's dog. Through his adventure many issues bubbled to the surface. But you were most taken with the description of this teenager and how he saw the world and reacted to it. The Broadway production was incredible in how it was able to bring to life what was written on the page.

When you returned to campus you invited the Director of Disability Services to lunch. You knew she had read the book. Your motives were two-fold. First, you wanted to discuss the show since you thought she would be interested. Second, you wanted to talk with her about the significant increase of

students on the Autism Spectrum attending the institution. She had kept the campus Executive Council apprised of the numbers. However, services for this population had not evolved. You wanted to see what could be done to work with this ever-growing group of undergraduates.

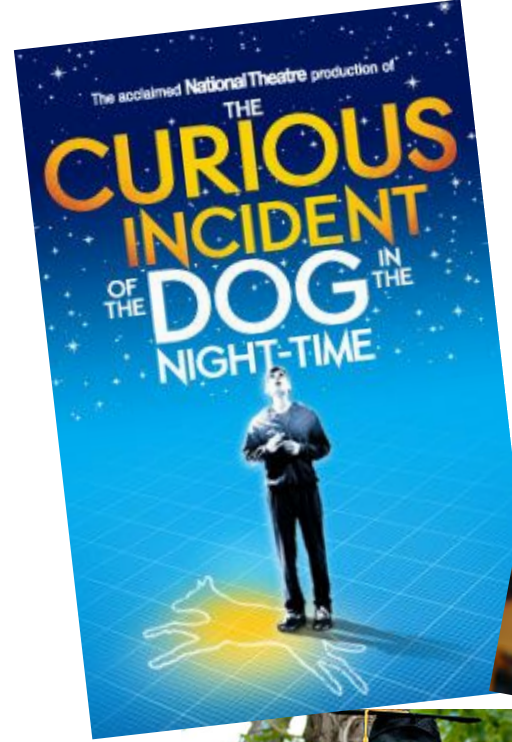
Your lunch went quite well. You were able to maintain your Atkins Diet regiment—burger with no bun, veggies and side salad, no dessert—and had a lively discussion about the book and play. The two of you also decided the opportunity to address the increasing population of students on the Spectrum was a good one. It was agreed to set-up a committee comprised of the Director of Disability Services, an individual from residence life, a faculty member, someone from the Office of Student Activities, and mental health services. The charge would be to provide assistance and advice in the development of a Disability Services program aimed at providing personal, social, and academic integration into the campus community. With the Board of Trustees committee on Growth and Development meeting in just a few weeks, the timing is ripe to present a plan, along with a budget, to the governing body. Due to time constraints it is agreed the length of the PPT or PDF file would be between 15-25 slides.

Act One

1. What are Autism Spectrum Disorders?
2. The Problem
3. Essential Facts
4. Additional Information Needed
5. Principal Decision Makers

Act Two

1. Relevant Theories and Laws
2. Possible Plans: Plan A & B
3. Finale: Course of Action



Act One: Setting the Stage

1. What are Autism Spectrum Disorders?
 2. The Problem
 3. Essential Facts
 4. Additional Information Needed
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What are Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)?

(National Institute of Mental Health, 2016)

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is the name for a group of developmental disorders. ASD includes a wide range, “a spectrum,” of symptoms, skills, and levels of disability.

People with ASD often have these characteristics:

- Symptoms that typically are recognized in the first two years of life
- Symptoms that hurt the individual’s ability to function socially, at school or work, or other areas of life
- Ongoing social problems that include difficulty communicating and interacting with others
- Repetitive behaviors as well as limited interests or activities

“There are no clear statistics on college enrollment of students with ASD, but it is estimated that they comprise anywhere from **0.7%** to **1.9%** of the college population with an **80%** incompleting rate.”

<<The Problem>>

Our institution has experienced a growing number of students on the Autism spectrum and the services provided to this population has not subsequently increased.

<<Essential Facts>>

- There are undergraduate students on the Autism spectrum at our institution.
- Our Institution is in or around New York City.
- The Board of Trustees Committee on Growth and Development is meeting soon. This meeting will be an opportunity to present our ideas for how to improve the support given to students on the Autism spectrum at our institution.
- A committee made up of four student affairs professionals from around campus has been formed. The committee will propose a plan to the Board of Trustees committee who has the authority to create a budget for implementation.
- The Executive Council on campus is aware of the increase in numbers of students on the Autism spectrum at the institution.

<<Additional Information Needed>>

Knowing more would help us make better informed decisions

- Who does the Dean of Students report to? Does that person have any authority over decisions made in regards to the Disability Services office?
- What time of year is it? Do we have a deadline? Short term versus long term solution(s) would be impacted by timeline.
- What are the services/resources currently offered on campus?
- How many students currently use the services/resources?
- Do the current services provide personal, social, and academic support for the students?
- What are the actual statistics of “increased” number of students on the Autism spectrum over time at the institution?
- How accessible are the services to the students on the Autism spectrum?
- What are the legal requirements for providing services to this group of students?

<<Principal Decision Makers>>

- Dean of Students
- Director of Disability Services
- Executive Council
- Board of Trustees Committee on Growth and Development
- Student Affairs Professionals Committee (Made up of 1 Staff Member from each of these functional areas - Residence Life, Academic Affairs (Faculty Member), Office of Student Activities and Mental Health Services)

Act Two: The Solution

1. Relevant Theories and Laws
 2. Possible Plans: Plan 1 & 2
 3. Finale: Course of Action
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<<Relevant Theories & Laws>>

Theory of Cognitive Development

- Piaget's (1952) theory explains the Cognitive Development over the human's lifespan.
- Understanding this theory may help administrators understand the student development of students with cognitive disorders.

Four Propositions of Campus Environments

- Strange's (1994) theory articulates four propositions for students and their interactions within a college environment.
- Understanding this theory may help administrators understand how students with cognitive disorders operate within the setting of a college or university.

Laws

- Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act or the Workforce Investment Act
- Higher Education Opportunity Act

Plan #1

Description

- This plan would have **no cost to students** participating in program
- The students would select the resources they need from a menu of options

Options include:

- Intentional and customized campus visit tour that focuses on showcasing the resources available to this group of students on campus
- There would be a specific session at Orientation for students and their families focused on sharing the resources available to these students on campus
- During the first week of classes there would be a Welcome event to help these students connect with other Students, Faculty and Staff members that are part of this community on campus
- Option to be a part of a Peer Mentor program that provides support
- Option to attend a variety of events throughout the school year that focus on personal, social and academic integration to the campus sponsored by each of the invested functional areas (Residence Life, Office of Student Activities, Academic Affairs and Mental Health Services)

Plan #1

Advantages

- Cost effective to the students
- Is accessible to all students (those with and without a disability)
- Integrates both students with and without disabilities into the campus community
- Encourages several campus partners to interact with the students
- Voluntary learning environment

Disadvantages

- Hard to identify who uses the resources and for what reasons
- Lacks a professional staff member to identify specific individual needs
- Self selecting from a variety of options may become overwhelming to students

Plan #2

Description

- Paid mentorship program- some scholarships offered
- Each student is matched with a graduate assistant or professional staff mentor
- Staff mentor serves as a liaison who meets with faculty for the student twice a semester
- Each student receives personalized assessment and skill development in 1:1 meetings
- Skills developed include personal, social, and academic
 - Examples: Classroom etiquette, navigating group projects, learning to live with a roommate, financial responsibility
- Weekly programs and social gatherings offered to all students, not just those who pay
- Program is repeatable each semester

Plan #2

Advantages

- Students work with trained graduate assistants and professionals
- Staff are able to work one on one with students on the spectrum to better assist in their personalized development
- More consistent contact with students to aid in student development areas
- Faculty are updated on students' needs

Disadvantages

- Not accessible to all students due to membership fees
- Requires students to self-identify as being on the autism spectrum
- More frequent contact with professional staff may not prepare students as well to interact with their peers

Course of Action

And the plan we
choose is.....
(drumroll)

BOTH!

Why we chose them:

All of the individualized meetings proposed in Plan #2 would be paid for by student membership fees into the program. Therefore, any money budgeted for the office would be dedicated to Plan #1 initiatives offered to all students. Offering services from both plans ultimately gives students the most options whether it be personalized attention or large group opportunities. By choosing both plans, staff can understand where each student is developing cognitively if they participate in the individual appointments, and through the larger scale campus programs staff can focus on the students' interactions and development within the larger campus environment.

References

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