AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN COLLEGE: CHARACTERISTICS AND PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

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WHAT IS AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)?

- Developmental disability
  - Complex behavioral, neurological and genetic features
- Two core areas of impairment
  - Social communication
  - Challenges with
    - Executive functioning
    - Emotion regulation
    - Independent living skills
  - Repetitive behaviors and restrictive interests

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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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"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

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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

SEGAL, 2010

SHOWING RESULTS FROM Michele Garcia Winner check out: www.socialthinking.com

HIGH SCHOOL VS. COLLEGE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IEPs and 504 plans</td>
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<td>IDEA</td>
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<td>Network of supports</td>
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<td>Case managers</td>
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<td>Modifications (e.g., written expression)</td>
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<th>College</th>
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<td>Letter of accommodations</td>
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<td>ADA</td>
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<td>Expectation of independence</td>
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<td>Self-advocacy</td>
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<td>Emphasis on writing ability and written communication</td>
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SEGAL, 2010
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

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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., paraprofessionals), 57% use assistive technology, and 70% receive “related services” (e.g., speech therapy, behavioral services, psychological services)

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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

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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

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Mental Health Concerns

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

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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

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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

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
- Academic and Writing Centers
- Tutoring Services
- Student Activity Organizations
- Residence Life
- Career Center
- "Helping fields" academic departments

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-communicative 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

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### “Unidentified” Students

- Many students with ASD in college may not have an official diagnosis, they may be “undiagnosed”, or they may not have sought out any services
- Be discrete – engage student in a discussion about concerns
- Be solution-focused, rather than label-focused
- Connect student to existing campus supports (e.g., disability services, mental health counseling, tutoring, etc.)

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### Classroom Strategies

#### Build rapport – take time to get to know the student, learn about interests and strengths
- Encourage use of office hours
- Consider increasing visual presentation of information
- If student has academic accommodations, meet with student to understand what supports are helpful and why
- Allow for breaks and self-regulation
- Create subtle non-verbal cues for self-management

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### Classroom Strategies

#### Attendance and Participation
  - If attendance is “optional” (and attendance is poor), explain why attendance is important and concrete consequences for not attending
  - If attendance is mandatory, explain the concrete behaviors associated with attendance (arrive on time, stay throughout, participation expectations, sign-ins, etc.)
  - If student does not participate, work with the student to learn “safe and simple” means of participating
  - If student participates “too much”, coordinate with student to create concrete expectations and subtle cues for limiting participation

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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
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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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
- Prompt 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

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Self-advocacy and Self-awareness

- Many of our students with ASD have had limited experience with taking the initiative to approach instructors about concerns, needs, supports, etc.
- Reach out to the student (privately) — create a safe space for discussion and problem solving
- Connect to resources directly

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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

Sagot, 2010

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

Sagot, 2014

Potential Campus-wide Initiatives

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

Sagot, 2016

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

Sagot, 2016

Peer Mentoring – Creating a Program

- Office of Disability Services
- Academic Affairs
- Counseling/Psychological Services
- College of Education
- Stand alone

Sagot, 2016

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

Sagot, 2016
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

- "Topical" 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 (3 sessions)
  - Social skills (3 sessions)
  - Using media and information resources

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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
- Utilize a Cognitive Behavior Therapy format
- 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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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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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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Understanding ASD in College

ASD
- Social/interactional skills
- Repetitive and stereotyped patterns
- Restricted by interests
- Visual, auditory, or tactile sensitivities
- Communicative difficulties

Transitions
- Special interests, computers, creativity
- Technology, tech

Engaging experiences
- Concrete, structured, real-world
- Multi-sensory input

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

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

What do “transition” programs do?

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

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

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