

# TEACHING COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER(ASD)

by: JACQUELINE LUBIN, Ed. D. Fort Hays State University

## ABSTRACT

According to Wei, Wagner, Hudson, Yu & Javitz (2016), approximately 33% of students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the K-12 setting pursue higher education. As more children are being identified in schools, more are transitioning into postsecondary settings (Gelbar, Smith, & Reichow, 2014). While college personnel working in counseling, disability, and guidance offices may have some familiarity with working with students with ASD, many faculty do not. This increase in the number of students with ASD present on college campuses makes it pivotal that professors understand the population with whom they are working (Barnhill, 2016). This literature review aims to increase faculty awareness on working with college students with ASD through a discussion on the challenges of college students with ASD, and evidence-based practices that may be incorporated into postsecondary settings. It will include practical tips for faculty on ways to help students transition from high school to college life by catering to their social and academic needs.

## INTRODUCTION

For the past decades, there have been a growing number of students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). According to Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] (2018), in the United States, 1 in 59 children has been identified with ASD as opposed to 1 in 2000 in 1980s. The increase in prevalence may be due to many factors, including broader definition of ASD, greater awareness and/or improved diagnosis. However, irrespective of the reason, the increase in prevalence of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) will have direct impact on postsecondary settings. Researchers have reported that there is an upsurge of students with ASD attending college (Gelbar, Smith, & Reichow, 2014; Grogan, 2015; Longtin, 2014). Approximately 33% of students diagnosed with ASD in the K-12 setting pursue higher education (Wei, Wagner, Hudson, Yu & Javitz, 2016). Shattuck et al. (2012) confirms these findings with an estimate that approximately one-third of high school students with ASD are likely to attempt college within six years of leaving high school.

Faculty, in particular, need to understand college student with ASD as they have direct contact with these students and directly impact how successful they become in adulthood. Gobbo and Shmelsky (2014) explain that faculty need to “understand the scope of challenges as well as strategies for success” when working with college students with ASD (p. 21). Therefore, the purpose of this presentation is two-fold:

- to bring awareness and sensitization of the challenges of college students with ASD;
- to provide foundational knowledge to faculty on ways to help college students with ASD be more successful.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions were researched:

- i. What are the challenges of college students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?
- ii. What are effective strategies for working with college students with ASD?

## METHODOLOGY

In order to provide faculty with relevant and current data on working with students with autism spectrum disorder, literature on educational life of college students with ASD between 2012-2018 was reviewed systematically in the following areas: legal considerations; characteristics; challenges; and best practice/instruction. The review of literature over the past six years revealed that a limited theoretical and empirical research exist, and the focus has been on challenges, with very little on best practice for postsecondary settings.

## FINDINGS: CHALLENGES

- Have average to above average intellect but their major difficulty lies in with dealing with social-emotional situations (Cullen, 2015; Dente & Coles, 2012; Longtin, 2014; Sayman, 2015)
- Difficulty with reciprocal conversation
- Difficulty in accurately reading nonverbal social cues of teacher and peers
- Difficulty in knowing when appropriate to ask questions and how to address professors
- Problems with theory of mind
- Ask many questions on a topic
- Monopolize a discussion or make off-topic comments
- Many have poor communication skills
- Exhibit problems with executive functioning, such as planning, organization, and time management
- Have weak central coherence, i.e., may have an intense focus on details and not the big picture
- Tend to have difficulty with critical thinking and deficits in cognitive flexibility
- May suffer from mental health issues and sensory overload May feel overwhelmed, stressed, depressed and anxious all the time
- Difficulty managing anxiety
- Have difficulty working on group projects, seeking assistance when needed
- Face challenges in advocating for themselves, as many do not understand the disability themselves

## FINDINGS: STRATEGIES

- The best practice for students with autism spectrum disorder proposed for postsecondary settings are similar to those used in the K-12 settings
- Researchers, together with legislative bodies, recommend the use of **universal design interventions/instruction (UDI)** and approaches in college to help meet the needs of all learners (Burgstahler & Russo-Gleicher, 2015).
- UDI is the design of instructional products and environment to be usable by all students, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design

UDI Practices:

Establishing Rapport:

- Share contact information with student- written in syllabus, orally in classroom
- Explicitly invite student to discuss problems or queries

Group Discussion Rules:

- Give clear, specific directions on discussion expectations in your classroom
- State the number of questions that may be asked during one session
- Have a repertoire of strategies to politely redirect discussion, when necessary
- Provide a variety of ways to participate in group discussion, such as use of a card, writing, orally, use of apps

Dealing with Sensory Issues:

- Allow flexible seating arrangement
- Have frequent breaks
- Allow use of protective eye-wear
- Record lectures and make available online or asynchronously

Language Use:

- Minimize use of figurative language, innuendos, and jargons
- Give step-by-step directions
- Use task analysis
- Make due dates and expectations clear

## CONCLUSION

- As the population of students with ASD who enter higher education increases, there becomes a greater need and urgency for faculty to know how to teach and support these students to succeed academically
- Teaching students with ASD in postsecondary settings present many challenges- as students and faculty do not fully understand the disability
- Colleges need to move beyond merely providing formal accommodations
- Faculty will need assistance in supporting students with ASD
- Universal design instruction is simply one way support may be provided to students

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