

Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016), one in 54 children has been identified as having autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Increasing numbers of students with ASD are enrolling in higher education, particularly those with Asperger's syndrome, which falls on the high functioning end of the continuum. The Mayo Clinic describes autism spectrum disorder as "a condition related to brain development that impacts how a person perceives and socializes with others, causing problems in social interaction and communication...Spectrum refers to the wide range of symptoms and severity."

College students with ASD are often bright, highly motivated, articulate, excellent in art, math or science, and detail oriented. At the same time, they may struggle with social interactions, impulse control, rigid thinking and time management, for example. But no two students with autism traits are the same.

Students with ASD may or may not disclose their condition or seek accommodations. In a classroom or office situation, you may notice unusual behaviors, such as limited eye contact, repetitive movements, constant questions, and difficulty with group assignments. You may also observe that the student has difficulty transitioning to new tasks and overreacts to situations. Critiques and class presentations may be very stressful.

Anticipating the needs of diverse learners bolsters student success. You may want to consider modifications that won't fundamentally alter the curriculum. The following suggestions can benefit students with ASD, as well as other students who struggle with some of the same challenges, such as social anxiety, rigidity, and disorganization:

- Review the course syllabus, clearly articulate expectations and rules. Provide predictable structure and consistent routines. Stress important dates and deadlines.
- If realistic, reduce sensory overload in the classroom, such as vibrant colors, strong smells, or harsh noises. Sensory overload can result in increased self-soothing behaviors, such as rocking, finger flapping or pacing.
- Invite students who ask frequent or irrelevant questions to talk with you before or after class. If the student monopolizes class time, state that you will not call on the student again until others have contributed.
- Consider allowing a student to record your lectures and access course notes for the semester.
- Take a Universal Design for Learning approach that incorporates multiple visual, auditory and sensory formats into teaching and assessment.

- Be patient if the student has problems with inductive reasoning and comprehending multiple meanings. Remind the student that other people may have different feelings and perspectives that should be respected.
- Explain abstract concepts, e.g. irony, allegories, and metaphors. Some students take things quite literally.
- Keep individual meetings brief and to the point. Build trust and rapport. Ask students what is most important for you to understand about them. Ask about their goals. Be clear and direct. Don't show anger when making corrections. Ask students what you can do to support their learning style.
- Reinforce boundaries. If problems arise, point out that others may perceive intense feelings or obsessive interest as intrusive, or even as stalking behavior. Give concrete examples of what's meant by "unwanted attention" or being "just friends."
- Recognize when a student has a limited capacity to be flexible. Be supportive of the need for rules and structure. Write down step-by-step directions, if appropriate.

Contact Accessibility Resources, 132 Memorial Library, (507) 389-2825 with questions related to ASD or accommodations. The Counseling Center is also a helpful resource, 285 Centennial Student Union, (507) 389-1455. Call 911 or Campus Security, (507) 389-2111 for safety concerns or help with disruptive incidents. Reports will be available to the Office of Student Conduct and the Behavioral Consultation Team.

Adapted by the Office of Student Conduct, Minnesota State Mankato.

Autism spectrum disorder. Mayo Clinic. Retrieved from: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/autism-spectrum-disorder/home/ovc-20337866>

Rochester Institute of Technology. (2014). Emerging practices for supporting students on the autism spectrum in higher education. Retrieved from <https://www.rit.edu/~w-ssp/documents/ASDinHigherEdGuide.pdf>

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