

Supporting Postsecondary Students with ASD in the Classroom



Strategies for supporting postsecondary success for neuro-diverse students, including students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), may be unfamiliar to many faculty and instructional staff. In 2020, the Centers for Disease Control determined that one in every 54 students between the ages of 8-14 meets the criteria for a diagnosis of ASD. The growing number of students with ASD who will graduate and enter postsecondary education institutions in the next ten years makes it important to increase awareness of practices that can be used for classroom success.

CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS WITH ASD:

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurologically-based developmental disability that is defined by difficulties with social communication, unusual or restricted interests and behaviors, and sensory sensitivities. The following characteristics may be present in a student with ASD. Due to the diversity and complexity of this disability, no student will demonstrate all of the characteristics listed here.

These students may have impressive intellect, vocabularies and excellent fact recall, but may struggle with problem-solving, common sense, and comprehension skills. Many individuals with ASD are visual learners.

An understanding of these characteristics is important, because the behavior of these individuals is frequently misinterpreted. Many behaviors that seem odd or unusual are due to the disability and not the result of intentional rudeness.

In the classroom, you may notice:

- Errors in the interpretation of body language, intentions, or facial expressions
- Difficulty seeing the motives and perceptions of others
- Unusual body movements or repetitive behavior
- Difficulty with seeing the big picture; perseverating on insignificant details (can't see the forest for the trees)
- Difficulties with transitions and changes in schedule
- Struggles with perfectionism or wanting things "just so"
- Problems with time-management and organization (including initiating, planning, carrying out and finishing tasks)
- Unusual sensitivity to touch, sounds, and visual details, may demonstrate sensory overload or sensory-seeking behavior
- Poor quality eye contact, may appear off-task
- Problems understanding social rules (such as personal space)
- Tendency to talk "at you" rather than "with you" or speak in a way that appears argumentative or condescending
- Conversation and questions may be tangential or repetitive
- Frequent mention of restricted interests that may be unusual or unrelated to the discussion topic
- Unusual speech intonation, volume, rhythm, and/or rate
- Literal understanding of language (difficulty interpreting words with double meaning, metaphors and sarcasm)
- Problems asking for help

SUGGESTIONS FOR SUCCESS:

Here are some ways to support students with ASD. Many of these recommendations will also support other students with invisible disabilities.

- ◆ Be crystal clear in communication. Clearly define course requirements, dates of exams, and when assignments are due. Syllabi should clearly state the formatting expectations for assignments, date, time, and method of assignment submission.
- ◆ Consider including a statement in your syllabus inviting students to meet to share more about their disability.
- ◆ Consider sharing rubrics for grading of assignments. Follow up any changes to the syllabus shared verbally with an email or written announcement. Written reminders of impending due dates will support on-time assignment submissions.
- ◆ Make all expectations explicit. Don't require these students to "read between the lines" to interpret your intentions. Students may not automatically generalize instructions from one assignment to the next.
- ◆ Provide direct confidential feedback to the student when you observe areas of academic or social communication difficulty.
- ◆ Encourage proactive use of resources designed to help students with study skills, particularly organizational skills.
- ◆ Support comprehension by asking students to restate the last point.
- ◆ Encourage students to set electronic prompts and calendar functions to chunk or organize work.
- ◆ "Showing leads to knowing." Take advantage of the student's strong visual processing skills to supplement lectures.

Students with ASD may feel overwhelmed by sensations in the room, including odors, fluorescent lights, or machine noise. Some may benefit from sensory-modulating activities or "sensory shields" in the classroom. Students with ASD benefit from structure and predictability. You can use the following strategies to support success during classes and in social interactions.

IDEAS FOR MANAGING CLASSROOM CHALLENGES

Students with ASD often have difficulty understanding the expected amount of participation in class discussions. Sometimes, they may not notice that they are contributing too much, or they may respond to rhetorical questions, or ask many questions about something the instructor said that piqued their interest. Responding to these questions and comments can take the class in an unexpected direction. Here are some suggestions to help clarify expectations and manage class contributions:

- Cover expectations for participation in your syllabus in specific terms:
 - Discuss civility expectations, and diversity of opinions that will be honored in your class.
 - If you limit the number of comments or questions per class, state this, and stick to it.
- To manage discussions during class, consider visual supports that lend structure
 - Identify a portion of the whiteboard that can serve as a "parking lot" for questions or comments that were not relevant to the point at hand, so you can come back to these as time permits.
 - Have students submit questions on index cards at the end of class, and cover them at the beginning of the next class.
 - Offer electronic options for asking or answering questions.
 - Use popsicle sticks labeled with student names for calling on students.
 - Avoid rhetorical questions, idioms, words with double meaning and sarcasm, unless you explain your usage. Using imprecise language, like "later," "might" and "maybe" when giving directions or answering questions can lead to more questions.
 - Redirect preoccupying interests to help focus/motivate the student. Suggest ways to integrate interest into the course, such as related paper topics.
- Permit students to engage in sensory-modulating activities, such as rocking in-seat, standing, or using a silent fidget. Sensory shields, like noise-canceling headphones, sunglasses, or hoods or caps may help attenuate sensory challenges.

IDEAS FOR MANAGING OUT-OF-CLASS INTERACTIONS

Understanding social boundaries is an area of difficulty for many students with ASD. It is very helpful to set specific limits on interactions in order for the students to have clarity. Well-intentioned instructors who know a great deal about an area of study or peers who spend time listening attentively to students with ASD can be mistaken as friends. They may feel overwhelmed by contacts from students with ASD, but not know how to explain the boundaries that they want implemented without appearing cold or unkind. Students with ASD will do best when clear parameters are set:

- Specify your preferred method of contact (direct email, class portal, telephone, locations, etc.). Establish expectations for hours of contact and how long it may take to receive a reply.
- Set boundaries for contacting you (time of day, frequency, restricted to issues pertaining to the class).
- Refrain from accepting requests to engage with students on social media formats.
- Consider office hour appointments instead of open office hours. Pre-establish a time-limit for office hours visits, and ask for the purpose of the visit in advance.
- Be consistent. Nothing is more confusing to students with ASD as when people violate their own rules. If you say you will not respond to emails after 5 pm, stick to your rule.
- Be direct. Students with ASD have trouble with "soft" feedback. Provide direct feedback when contact is inappropriate in frequency, intensity or focus. Many times students will not be aware of this. Directly state the expectation rather than hinting or making general statements. The student will understand your feelings or concerns best when you come right out and tell them what they are doing that is troublesome, and what you want them to do instead.



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