



# College Experiences for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

## Identity, Disclosure, and Accommodations

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### Background:

College students with autism face daunting social, emotional, independent-living, self-advocacy, and communication challenges both inside and outside of the classroom (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). However, critical holes in the empirical literature make it difficult to develop low cost, high yield, evidence-based interventions to improve student grades, persistence, graduation, and subsequent employment.

### Objectives:

The current study begins to fill these knowledge gaps by (1) defining salient issues affecting college success for individuals with autism and (2) describing institutional initiatives with potential to promote college success for students with autism. The study's primary research question is: How do students with autism make sense of their experiences in higher education and respond to barriers potentially limiting postsecondary success?

### Methods:

Data for the study are drawn from interviews, following the guidelines outlined by Fetterman (1998), with nine students with a formal diagnosis of ASD. Interviews centered upon student inputs, experiences, and outcomes in higher education (Astin, 1991). For example, participants were asked to describe their initial fears about going to college and their decisions about whether to disclose their diagnosis.

Analyses proceeded using a constant comparative approach (Straus & Corbin, 1998) with researchers coding data independently but meeting periodically to ensure convergence during two distinct rounds of coding. First, two of this paper's authors used Astin's (1991) framework as an *a-priori* descriptive coding structure. The second round of coding was led by a third researcher. To confirm appropriate interpretation, two of the participating students reviewed and approved this paper.

### Results:

As expected, all of the interviewed students cited postsecondary enrollment as a major life event. Once in college, students took a pragmatic approach to disclosing their autism diagnosis, only revealing diagnoses if needed to acquire formal accommodations from the postsecondary institution or when asked directly by peers. One student explained, "I don't know when or how to say it so I was always wait for it to come up" while another said "that never really came up."

Student comments also revealed an internal tension regarding the manner in which autism fit into their own sense of identity. Decisions to disclose their diagnosis to peers or the institution or to seek formal accommodations, therefore, were the outward manifestations of the internal identity development process for each student. For example, one student boasted "So I'm very proud of the fact that I'm able to fake out as many people as I do, honestly" but, moments later, concluded "I mean I know that's not really a healthy way to relate to one with autism or Asperger's."

#### Conclusions:

The voices of college students with ASD have generally been drowned out by the overwhelming emphasis (in the general public and scholarly literature) on young children and early interventions. This study amplifies their voices and empowers individuals with ASD to self-advocate as they consider opportunities for continued educational advancement. Now professionals working in postsecondary education must listen to these voices and act on behalf of the growing number of college students with autism.