



Barnhill, G. (2016). Supporting students with asperger syndrome on college campuses: Current practices. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 31(1), p.3-15.

Annotated by Sarah Weitzel and Samantha Rohrbaugh – 11/15/2016

ABSTRACT With the increasing number of students with Asperger syndrome (AS) and high functioning autism (HFA) enrolling in college, it has become apparent that support services are greatly needed to assist these students in navigating college life, both academically and socially. Yet, there is a dearth of research describing the specific supports needed for this population. This exploratory study sought to determine the current support practices offered on college and university campuses for students with AS. A critical focus of this study was on the specific accommodations accessed and the support services provided, including support groups, counseling, supervised social activities, and summer transition programs. Both supports that were found to be helpful and not helpful are provided. In addition, recommendations for implementing support programs are provided.

SUMMARY

Purpose of Study

This study was conducted to identify the specific accommodations and supports for students with AS at an institution of higher education. They looked at programs that provided specific support for students with AS. The overarching goal was to find the best ways to help college students on the spectrum through college life.

- i. Goals of Exploratory Research
 1. What are the accommodations and services currently being provided for students with AS?
 2. How can the Disability Services offices use this information to improve programs and support services?
 3. What components of successful college and university programs that provide support services for students with AS in HFA?

Framework

More and more students with Aspergers and high functioning autism are going to college where disability resource centers don't cover all of their needs. Autism is a wide spectrum, but some of the challenges often associated with it are sensory processing issues, lack of social skills including appropriate eye contact and conversation skills, and comorbid disorders like depression and ADHD. Often these differences affect the way students interact with their peers and professors. These deficiencies in social skills also interfere with the way students act in and outside of the classroom. However, these students on the spectrum often do not receive the social and emotional support they



Original material from the College Autism Network by [Cox et al.](#), is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).



Barnhill, G. (2016). Supporting students with asperger syndrome on college campuses: Current practices. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 31(1), p.3-15.

need. Additionally, faculty and staff often lack the training and insight to understand and interact with these students. This is a problem as these students have the ability to succeed academic if they had the appropriate support services in place.

Population and Sample

The authors found 45 schools online or in other search inquiries through a literature review of postsecondary institutions that were reported to have specific support services beyond those of a traditional disability support office. This research resulted in 45 schools, which was narrowed down to 31 that had programs for students on the spectrum, which was further narrowed to 30 who would complete the survey.

Overview of Methods

There was a literature review that looked for current practices used by autism support programs that went beyond typical disability supports. Such typical supports are extended time on tests and assignment deadlines.

Then a survey was developed by the researcher and edited by peers that corresponded with the information about support and accommodations from the literature review.

- i. The first portion of the survey included demographic questions about the university and student makeup.
- ii. The second portion identified specific support services. This section had 2 parts. The first set of questions asked about how long the program had been active, the number of students in the program, and what services were offered based on a list provided by the researcher. The second set of questions asked if the program provided "an AS or ASD support group, counseling services, housing accommodations, planned supervised social activities, and any other specialized supports for these students." If they offered these services, they were asked to describe them.
- iii. The third portion asked about outcomes of the program with measures that included "number of students graduated, the percentage of students who completed their degrees, and the length of time taken to complete the degree."
- iv. There were also some questions on parent involvement and a request to provide any other relevant information about creating effective programs.





Barnhill, G. (2016). Supporting students with asperger syndrome on college campuses: Current practices. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 31(1), p.3-15.

Variables or Broad Topics

The broad topic of the survey was information on current practices of autism support programs and their recommendations.

Specifically, the researcher looked at

1. What services were provided
2. The prevalence of services at different schools
3. How many students were enrolled in the program
4. How many students at the school had ASD
5. School demographics

Findings/Results

- i. The study found that there were many accommodations in practice at postsecondary institutions, however they were not usually supported by a lot of evidence. Some of this is due to the age of the programs. Some stated that they wanted to collect more outcome data to combat this problem.
- ii. Some students don't seek out accommodations right away, or they choose not to report their diagnosis. This means that there are probably more people with AS and ASD at these schools. Still, about 2/3 of programs served 1 to 3 and a little less than 1/3 had more than 30.
- iii. The starting point of many of these programs was often the need for improved executive functioning and behavior changes.
- iv. Accommodations and services tended to focus on social skills, executive functioning skills, time management and organizational skills, sensory challenges, academic adjustments, mental health, and career planning. These accommodations should be flexible and tailored to the individual to make sure they are getting the most out of the program. Some of these programs addressed these skills in a seminar class. Generally, the goal is to wean the student off of these accommodations as they proceed through college.
- v. In nearly half of the programs the students were not fully using the services available.
- vi. Due to this and the fact that many students need only a few accommodations, some programs are looking at a tiered fee structure. Other programs receive school and grant funding. The average fee for a year of support is \$6525.
- vii. A very popular mode of support was peer mentors. These mentors are often graduate students who are either paid or fulfilling an internship requirement.



Original material from the College Autism Network by [Cox et al.](#), is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).



Barnhill, G. (2016). Supporting students with asperger syndrome on college campuses: Current practices. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 31(1), p.3-15.

- Their relationship with the students looks like an important factor. It is important that these mentors are well trained and commitment.
- viii. The effectiveness of social skills support groups is not clear as students find it repetitive.
 - ix. Collaboration and teamwork with other departments and campus services, including housing and safety, was emphasized as a necessary part of effective programs. Faculty and staff were often educated on a one on one basis, but some schools also had group workshops.
 - x. Working with parents and high schools to teach kids life skills before coming to college was also recommended. Parent involvement seemed to be an important factor in student success.
 - xi. 23% (n = 7) offered a summer transition program for students with AS and ASD. The programs ranged from a 3 day orientation to a 6 week summer program.
 - xii. Many programs offered employment supports, like assessment for employability, or partnered with other organizations that offered similar supports.
 - xiii. Additional supports included safe places on campus to meet, daily supervised study hall, life coaching, and development of a person-centered plan.
 - xiv. Partnered with speech/language department for conversation club, FBA's and BIP83% (n = 25) indicated that faculty were educated about AS and ASD through one-on-one discussions with specific support program coordinators or the Disabilities Service office; 87% educated Residence Life staff; 70% educated Student Health, Counseling and Academic Advising staff

Implications

- i. Further analyses in needed in order to determine which practices are in fact resulting in positive outcomes: higher graduation and retention rates, measurable skills increases, self-reported success and health from students, etc.
- ii. "Good fit" of the student to the school and program, looks like it is important for student success. Things like our institutional initiatives database will become increasingly necessary to get students to universities wherein they have a good fit.
- iii. The autism spectrum is a wide spectrum and each individual is different, strategies that work in one person may not work in another.



Original material from the College Autism Network by [Cox et al.](#), is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).



Barnhill, G. (2016). Supporting students with asperger syndrome on college campuses: Current practices. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 31(1), p.3-15.

- iv. The fact that there were only 31 schools found that had programs for students on the spectrum beyond the baseline services means that there are many students who may not be receiving the additional support services they need.

CRITIQUES & LIMITATIONS

Conceptual

The Programs included ASD and AS; not exclusively AS. Support services vary among higher education institutions.

Data

The sample was limited to what was on the internet or in previous research. This information is not always accurate or up to date. The lack of outcome data, which is related to the programs' recent beginnings and lack of clear cohort, severely limited the amount of useful data available.

Analysis

The data analysis did not present what accommodations were more effective than others, just what practices were present. This is partly due to the lack of research and outcome data.

Application

The authors did not indicated if the practices included stemmed from empirical evidence on their effectiveness. The article did not measure outcome data to know if institutional practices were beneficial. Thus, further research is needed to identify if these applied practices are beneficial to students with AS and others on the ASD spectrum.

FOLLOW-UP

Little Questions

- i. What is the best way to balance the integration of these students into the general college population so that they are not segregated and isolated?
 - ii. How do institutions serve students with AS that need additional personalized support services?
 - iii. "Is there a need to develop more structured admission criteria to these specific support programs to determine which students might be best served and is there a need to develop summer transition programs to assist students
-



Original material from the College Autism Network by [Cox et al.](#), is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).



Barnhill, G. (2016). Supporting students with asperger syndrome on college campuses: Current practices. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 31(1), p.3-15.

in developing the required skills to be successful at college?"

Big Questions

- i. Which of these practices can CAN adopt to develop our own trainings?
- ii. When creating intervention programs, should college students with AS and ASD be grouped together into the same programs or should there be programs more specialized according to each diagnosis?

Next Steps

Further progress is needed to identify effective intervention programs for college students with ASD. With this outcome information, current practices can be improved and altered to meet the needs of this populace of students.



Original material from the College Autism Network by [Cox et al.](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).