

# College Students with Autism: Case Studies

## Background & Purpose

These case studies can serve as tools to support the professional development of individuals who may encounter college students with autism, or those displaying autism-related characteristics. They are derived from formal research projects, email correspondence, questions presented during campus-based trainings and consultations, and informal conversations with a wide range of stakeholders. To protect the anonymity of those involved, the cases are fictionalized versions of real life scenarios described by autistic students, student affairs staff, college administrators, and faculty/instructors.

## Usage Scenarios

These case studies will be of most value when they are included as one part of a comprehensive workshop in which participants will be introduced to autism in higher education, use the case studies as a springboard to in-depth exploration of key topics, and have the opportunity to discuss specific experiences encountered by participants.

Although each of the cases can be used in a variety of settings by a wide range of stakeholders, some of the details in each case may be most applicable to specific college offices / units/ personnel. Below, we highlight a few stakeholders/offices for whom each case may be most relevant.

**Ellen & David:** Faculty/Instructors, Title IX Coordinators, Greek Life, Campus Police

**Leo & Evan:** Residence Life, Dean of Students Office, Facilities

**Marshall:** Faculty/Instructors, Academic Advisors

**Nikki & Professor Andrews:** Faculty/Instructors, Academic Deans, Conduct Officers

**Bryan:** Conduct Officers, Faculty/Instructors, Title IX Coordinators

**Darius:** Academic Advisors, Disability Service Office, Residence Life

**Samir:** Orientation, Residence Life, Parent and Family Services

We present a series of *guiding questions* for the cases on the next page.

## For More Information

The College Autism Network (CAN) is a national nonprofit organization linking varied stakeholders engaged in evidence-based efforts to improve access, experiences, and outcomes for college students with autism. CAN fulfills that mission through advocacy, research, and training. We have given presentations at dozens of professional conferences, consulted with a variety of individual campuses, and developed wide-ranging resources to support college success for students with autism.

Visit [CollegeAutismNetwork.org](http://CollegeAutismNetwork.org) or email [info@collegeautismnetwork.org](mailto:info@collegeautismnetwork.org) for more information.

## Guiding Questions

These guiding questions may help facilitate individual reflection and/or group discussions about the issues presented in the case studies. The questions have been written in a way that is applicable to all of the cases presented here. Moreover, each of the questions may be asked and answered by a wide range of postsecondary personnel.

Of course, we encourage each person reviewing these cases to consider them in light of their own institutional context, professional position, and personal awareness.

1. Have you encountered students or situations like the ones in the case studies? What sounds familiar – either about one (or more) of the students or the situations described?
2. What are the most important issues to be considered in each case study? Which elements of the case are most troubling, urgent, complex, unclear, or discomforting?
3. What language, arguments, or behaviors might tip you off to underlying issues affecting each of the people in the case studies?
4. What additional information might you try to get about the students and situations described? How might you go about getting that information in a legal, ethical, and timely manner?
5. Which of the events, activities, behaviors, language, or perspectives of each of the students reflect neurotypical norms? Which are most consistent with the characteristics of autism?
6. What are the possible responses to the situations described? How would you advise each of the relevant stakeholders to respond? How might each of the stakeholders react to such actions?
7. Which institutional policies, rules, or precedents might be relevant to each scenario?
8. Who else might you consult/involve to resolve the issue?
9. How might you structure a meeting with each of the students in the case study? What language, tone, or style would you try to use (or avoid)? What kind of follow-up would be appropriate?

## Ellen & David

It's the fourth week of the fall semester. Ellen is a sophomore in your introductory Sociology class who has asked to speak with you about a concern she has regarding another student. During your meeting, Ellen states that she is being harassed and stalked by David, another student in the class. This is what she describes:

"In the first class you assigned us to groups of about five students. David was in my group. He seemed kind of odd—didn't smile at anyone. When we introduced ourselves and answered your questions, he spoke really fast and kind of monotone, like he didn't want to be there. He was the only first-year student in our group, which is kind of random, and I felt bad for him because he looked really nervous. When we had to partner with someone in the group, I asked him if he'd like to be my partner for the exercise. He said yes. It went okay. He was a little weird, and when I answered one of the questions by saying that I liked One Republic (a band) and that I had gone to see them over the summer, he said, "One Republic sucks" in this pretty mean way. But everyone has their opinions, so I just let it go. I told him at the end of class that it was nice meeting him and I'd see him around.

"The next class, he came in after I had sat down, and he asked the person who was sitting next to me to move so he could sit there. The other guy did. David sat next to me and tried to make conversation, but he was *really* bad at it. Like he said, out of the blue, "I still think One Republic sucks." Lots of awkward pauses. I still felt bad for him. I have a brother with Downs, so I think I'm pretty sensitive to people who are not good in social situations. I asked him about his weekend, and if he likes his roommate, and stuff like that. He answered everything in that kind of harsh, monotone way.

"Every class after that—he comes in and sits next to me, even if someone is already in the seat. If I come in after him, which I tried twice, and sit elsewhere, he seems to get a little freaked out and gets up and moves to the seat next to me. The other students noticed and think it's kind of funny, so they always giggle and move for him. It's kind of become a game. I just try to be nice to him. Once he said something about not making any friends at school yet, and I told him that I was his friend. He just kind of grunted.

"Last week, remember when I announced to the class that my sorority was supporting a local literacy project and would be doing a fundraiser before the next football game? I asked people to come to my hall lounge to get their faces painted with school colors before the game? Well, David showed up at the lounge and asked one of my sorority sisters to move so he could sit next to me. She said no because we were working together. He got really angry and knocked one of the paint containers off the table. He calmed down when I walked him over to a chair elsewhere in the room, but then just sat in the lounge looking really mad the whole time I was in there. When we finished, I left with my sisters and he followed us toward the stadium, but then left after we went in.

"So he hasn't really done anything wrong, I guess, but he's starting to make me really nervous. My parents told me that he was stalking me, and that I should report him to the police. But I don't want to get him in trouble, and since your class is the only one we have together, I thought maybe I could just ask you for help."

## Leo & Evan

You have been asked to work with a resident advisor who is struggling with a student on his floor. The hall director has tried, but has been unsuccessful, and it's starting to look more and more like a conduct referral. The RA, Evan, and the student, Leo (a sophomore), are coming to see you this afternoon.

Upon reviewing notes that Evan has written in the Case Management System (CMS), you see that issues with Leo began the first weekend of the semester. Leo didn't live on campus last semester, so this is his first semester in housing. He has no conduct record or other mention in CMS from last year. The first note from Evan reports that Leo and his roommate had an argument over closet space that Evan was asked to mediate. Three days later, Leo's roommate moved out and to another floor. A new roommate was assigned to Leo, but moved out after two days, citing "different sleep schedules."

Evan's next note reports that Leo's hygiene has become a source of ridicule on the floor. Evan met with Leo to talk with him about the importance of showering regularly and cleaning up after himself when he uses the lounge (he left dirty dishes and uneaten food there several times).

When things didn't get better, the hall director, Alyssa, met with Leo. He denied making a mess in the lounge, but agreed to be more careful with his belongings. He also agreed to shower more frequently, which Alyssa was glad to hear since Leo smelled pretty bad at their meeting. At the conclusion of their meeting, Leo told Alyssa that "I do not want to speak with you anymore." She assured him that if he could keep up his end of their agreements, he wouldn't have to meet with her again.

Leo's habit of leaving dirty dishes and, one weekend, a pile of dirty laundry, in the lounge continued. Other residents were complaining to Evan about bugs and the smell. Evan went to Leo's room to talk with him. The room was a disaster. But more than the mess, Evan was concerned that Leo had put black paper on the windows, covering them completely. When he asked Leo about it, Leo said he didn't like the room to be too bright. He also told Evan to mind his own business and worry more about the other students who leave things in the lounge and the hockey players on the floor who smell bad after practice. "At least I don't come back drunk and puke all over the place like some other students in this hall," Leo said. He then asked Evan to leave, saying "I do not want to speak with you anymore."

Evan and Alyssa are pondering fining Leo for the lounge messes, but they are very uncomfortable approaching him to talk again, and so have requested your assistance. That meeting is three hours from now.

# Marshall

As a faculty member with advisory responsibilities, you meet with students to assist them in course enrollment as well as to monitor their academic progress. You work at a mid-size public university in the Midwest. You have been Marshall's advisor since he enrolled in August and will be meeting with him to sign up for his second-semester coursework. You don't remember much about Marshall except that...

- a) he is a first-year student who plans a double major in business and civil engineering,
- b) he has been fulfilling liberal studies requirements during his first semester, and
- c) your previous meeting was a little awkward, but you don't remember why.

At the next meeting with Marshall, you ask how his classes are going. He explains that he has been excelling in his college coursework, except for his introductory English Composition course. When you ask what made his English course different, he explained "I did OK on the research report, but have been getting bad grades on everything else. I have met with the teacher twice. He said my writing was 'choppy' and that I 'used too many declarative sentences.' I have followed his instructions and my last two assignments had mostly interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory sentences. But he still gave me C's on both assignments. That doesn't seem fair. I don't think he's a very good teacher."

Later in the meeting, you remind Marshall that he'll be required to take two "gateway" courses in business and engineering next semester. Each of them have an average enrollment of 40+ students per class. Marshall says he has been trying to avoid "classes that were too large, where the teachers didn't care and were just, you know, phoning it in." He is concerned that most of the class will be lectures and that the teacher won't have time to answer many questions when there are so many students in the class. He also knows the business class will involve group presentations that "make me very uncomfortable." He wants to know about alternative ways to meet the course requirements.

However, institutional policies and major-specific course sequences dictate that there *are* no alternatives.



## Nikki & Professor Andrews

As the Department Chair, you have received an email from Professor Andrews in the Computer Science program. He is asking to meet with you to discuss what he thinks is an academic dishonesty situation, but he's not sure. At the meeting, he explains that Nikki, a student in his Programming Basics class, has plagiarized an assignment. He has a way of checking students' assignments against one another to make sure they have all done their own work. Nikki's assignment, which required writing code, is extremely similar to another student's, Paulo's, and Professor Andrews' method of checking has indicated that it is statistically impossible for this to have happened without them working together.

Paulo is a talented programmer, Professor Andrews reports, who was already establishing himself as one of the better students in the class. Nikki is not as skilled, which is why Professor Andrews felt good putting them in the same study group. After seeing the results of the assignment check, Professor Andrews spoke to both Paulo and Nikki separately. Paula reported that Nikki had most likely copied his work from drafts he had shared with the group (Professor Andrews encourages them to share early products, but says he is clear they must turn in a final product that reflects their own work).

Nikki does not deny using Paulo's early drafts, but was insistent that Professor Andrews had said it was okay to copy. "She got angry and pretty defensive with me and said, 'you told us on September 8, September 11 and September 13 that we should share our work with each other because that's what good programmers do—share their work to get better.' I did say that, but I also said they had to turn in original work that showed they knew how to do the coding required in the assignment.

"I told her that I wouldn't fail her for the assignment, or report this, but that she had to do another assignment that demonstrated that she understood what was being asked of her, and not just copying another student's assignment. She refused.

"I normally would just fail a student for the assignment, which is 20 percent of the grade, but I get the feeling she really doesn't understand the distinction between what she did and what was asked, or why it was wrong. Paulo told me yesterday that she has made copies of his early drafts of the second assignment and I'm concerned that the same thing is going to happen, which means she'll fail the class. Honestly, I'm not sure she's going to make it as a computer science major, but I hate to be the one to tell her that."

# Darius

Darius is a new student who is starting college in the Honors program. As part of the application process, in one of his admissions essays, Darius disclosed that he had received a formal autism/Asperger's diagnosis at age 6. In grade school, he quickly moved from self-contained special education classrooms to mainstream classes. In high school he took a rigorous course load including Honors and AP courses; he has 18 hours of AP credit upon entry to your institution. Throughout all those courses he had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) with a variety of accommodations related to his autism. His parents have also been heavily involved with his education, advocating for him throughout his K-12 experiences.

Three weeks into his first semester, Darius showed up on the 'early alert' system recently instituted by your college. One of his instructors noted that Darius had attended the first two class sessions, but had missed the next three. When you call Darius's other professors and ask about his attendance, they say that they don't keep track of each students' attendance. As one said, "I do the lectures, come up with the assignments, and grade the tests. It's the students' responsibility to show up. And if they can pass my class without coming to class, more power to them."

You see in the notes that Darius has registered with the disability service office and give them a call. They tell you that he has, indeed, registered for and been granted some academic accommodations. But they have no way of knowing whether he has shared that information with his instructors and whether he has used the accommodations thus far.

When you contact Darius's residence hall director, she notes that Darius hasn't shown up on any disciplinary reports, and that the RA on the hall has made no mention of Darius in any of their meetings. Later in the day, the hall director calls back. When she talked to the RA on Darius's floor, the RA said that she had introduced herself to Darius, said hello to him once or twice more, but otherwise observed that Darius seemed to spend a lot of time in his room.

Having spent the entire morning trying to figure out what's going on with Darius, you don't seem to have gotten very far. But you have a student standing outside your office, two more student meetings this afternoon, and another 3 'early alert' students about whom you have received emails today. Not sure about what to do next, you scribble a note on Darius's file indicating who you talked to and concluding "no obvious signs of distress, extraneous circumstances, or unmet needs."

# Samir

On move-in day, you are approached by a mother who asks to speak with you privately about her son. She explains to you that her son, Samir, has Asperger's Syndrome. And no matter how much his parents protest, Samir refuses to tell anyone at the college about the condition. She explained, "When I called the disability services office on campus, they told me that they couldn't talk to me about Samir unless he gave his consent. The office said they would be happy to provide appropriate accommodations, but that they needed him to come into the office, request the support, and provide the necessary documentation." With an exasperated look on her face, she groans "but he's so stubborn he won't do it."

She continues by expressing her concern about Samir living away from home, and with a roommate no less. The family lives only 45 minutes away and wanted him to commute his freshman year, but he wanted the 'real college experience.' This will be Samir's first experience living away from home. The mom then runs through a rapid-fire list of things she's worried about...

- he'll forget to shower (unless its written on his schedule),
- he won't eat at the buffet dining hall (because he doesn't like it when other people touch his food),
- he'll wear the same clothes all the time (because he won't know how the washing machines work),
- he will miss classes (because he'll forget to set his alarm),
- he'll won't be able to sleep (because of the buzz from fluorescent lights)

When she sees her son and husband reemerge from the residence hall, she hastily hands you her business card and asks you to look out for Samir and give her a call if anything comes up.

You take a moment to watch the family interact as they move stuff from the car into the building. The man you presume to be Samir's father seems focused on carrying things inside. The mom helps too, but spends as much time watching Samir as she does transporting items. Samir, so far as you can tell, looks like a typical college freshman... full of nervous energy, a little shy, eager to move in, and mildly embarrassed by his parents. You wonder why the mom is so worried.

With hundreds (maybe thousands?) of new students moving in this weekend, it is only a few minutes before someone else comes up to you and asks for your help finding a nearby building. You quickly put the mom's card into your wallet and wonder "What am I supposed to do with this?"