Identifying and Addressing the Concerns of College Students with Autism

Jeffrey Edelstein, Bradley E. Cox, Amelia Anderson, Abigail Wolz

Florida State University, College of Education

Objectives

The objectives of this study are threefold:

1). Identify concerns which are unique to those with ASD, as well as those which are heightened (i.e. exacerbated in those with ASD relative to non-ASD peers).
2). Analyze the effects of identified concerns.
3). Explore methods of alleviating the concerns of these students in an impactful manner.

Background

With roughly 16,000 ASD students entering postsecondary institutions each year (Wei et. al, 2015) colleges and universities must understand the needs of this population and provide support to best enable success.

While transitioning into college, students with ASD are likely to experience considerable stress and anxiety as they face social, academic, and personal challenges they have not encountered before. Yet there is remarkably little research regarding the experiences of ASD individuals in higher education.

Inputs

Experiences

Outcomes

Methods

Student testimonials related to postsecondary education were gathered from the website WrongPlanet.net: an online resource for individuals with ASD that provides support through articles, forums, and discussions. Data were collected from discussions within the "School and College Life" forum.

The statements were then coded using Astin's (1991) Inputs-Experiences-Outputs model. The second round of coding followed specific themes that were established by the first round of coding. Students' concerns were identified by the use of words expressing feelings (i.e., fear, afraid, concern).

Findings

Students expressed fourteen distinct concerns which the researchers clustered into two types:

1). ASD-specific concerns (Concerns rarely present in non-ASD populations of postsecondary students. Can be related to behaviors typical to those with ASD)
2). ASD-heightened concerns (Concerns are commonly present in non-ASD populations of postsecondary students. May be expressed earlier, or more severely in ASD students)

Students commonly noted low levels of self-confidence and mental health issues (e.g. "So, how can I even begin to tell my parents in a week that I have failed… It is difficult for me not to constantly think of suicide because of this situation").

Within each type, student concerns were further categorized using the four subgroups of Baker and Siryk's (1986) Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) as academic, social, personal-emotional, or institutional attachment concerns.

Few students indicated resolutions to their issues, but at least one indicated the value of independent socialization (e.g. "Spend as much time developing social skills and… The school WILL NOT try to help you do this") as a route for overcoming concerns successfully.

Discussion and Future Directions

Little information regarding resolutions to college concerns was obtained. This may be reflective of the lack of actual resolutions occurring, or indicative of the resolutions in and of itself (i.e., students may not post on these forums once their concerns are resolved).

Understanding the both the similarities and differences in concerns between ASD and non-ASD students may allow institutions to better support this growing population.

Future studies should work to better understand the differences in how the recognized concerns manifest in these populations (e.g. mental health issues, academic perseverance), and how resolutions can or do occur in each.

ASD-specific

• Unofficial Diagnosis
• Bullying
• Loss of Services

ASD-heightened

• Personal Identity
• Roommates and Dorm Life
• Social Interaction

Academic	• "I liked the classes but just stressed over my grades too much."
Social	• "I haven't succeeded in getting anyone's phone number or becoming close."
Personal-emotional	• "I feel trapped with having so much responsibility so fast."
Institutional attachment	• "I'm struck by how absent any community or happiness seems to be among students at my uni[versity], not that I was surprised."

Acknowledgements

CARD — CENTER FOR AUTISM & RELATED DISABILITIES FSU AUTISM INSTITUTE

Wrong Planet

je13g@my.fsu.edu   (954) 937-2268   collegeautismnetwork.org

Identifying and Addressing the Concerns of College Students with Autism

By Jeffrey Edelstein

Background:

With roughly 16,000 ASD students entering postsecondary institutions each year (Wei et. al, 2015) colleges and universities must understand the needs of this population and provide support to best enable success. While transitioning into college, students with ASD are likely to experience considerable stress and anxiety as they face social, academic, and personal challenges they have not encountered before. Yet there is remarkably little research regarding the experiences of ASD individuals in higher education.

Objectives:

The objectives of this study are threefold:
1. Identify concerns which are unique to those with ASD, as well as those which are heightened (i.e. exacerbated in those with ASD relative to non-ASD peers).
2. Analyze the effects of identified concerns.
3. Explore methods of alleviating the concerns of these students in an impactful manner.

Methods:

Student testimonials related to postsecondary education were gathered from the website WrongPlanet.net, an online resource for individuals with ASD that provides support through articles, forums, and discussions. Data were collected from discussions within the "School and College Life" forum. The statements were then coded using Astin's (1991) Inputs-Experiences-Outputs model. The second round of coding followed specific themes that were established by the first round of coding. Students' concerns were identified by the use of words expressing feelings (i.e., fear, afraid, concern).

Results:

Students expressed fourteen unique concerns which the researchers clustered into two types: ASD-specific concerns (e.g. bullying, loss of prior supports) and ASD-heightened concerns (e.g. change in routine, hurting others). Within each type, student concerns were further categorized as either social concerns (e.g. "I haven't succeeded in getting anyone's phone number or becoming close ") or transitional concerns (e.g. "I feel trapped with having so much

responsibility so fast.")

Students commonly noted low levels of self-confidence and mental health issues (e.g. "So, how can I even begin to tell my parents in a week that I have failed... It is difficult for me not to constantly think of suicide because of this situation"). Few students indicated resolutions to their issues. Those who did resolve their concerns noted the importance of socialization (e.g. "Spend as much time developing social skills and... The school WILL NOT try to help you do this") and access to information as routes for overcoming their concerns successfully.

Conclusion:

Students with ASD often do not feel supported by their colleges and universities, suggesting they may not have the same perception of higher education as their neurotypical peers. However, by addressing the specific concerns expressed by these students, higher education professionals can help these individuals assimilate into postsecondary environments and maximize their academic and developmental potential.