Students with Autism: Inclusion Begins with Understanding
For starters

• Introductions
• Knowledge and perceptions
• Goals
Learning Outcomes

Understanding the college and national landscapes for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder/Asperger Syndrome (ASD/AS)

Use of this knowledge to provide programs and services that will be more inclusive of ASD-diagnosed students

Increased familiarity with ASD, related diagnoses and common characteristics

Increased confidence to interact with ASD-diagnosed students one-on-one
Today’s plan

- Understanding the college and national landscapes for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder/Asperger Syndrome (ASD/AS)
- Increase familiarity with ASD, related diagnoses and common characteristics
- Explore implications of ASD on campus
An organizing question:

A common characteristic of people on the Autism Spectrum is that they are “rule-followers.” Why, then, do they end up challenged by what is expected of them?
• On a scale of 1 to 5, how realistic is this situation? Have you responded to something similar?
• What information do you need as you begin to work on this, other than what’s provided here?
• What is your “opening statement” to David, Nikki, Leo when you first meet?
• What can/do you ask/share with the reporting person (Ellen, Professor Andrews, Leo/Alyssa)?
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Sesame Street’s Newest Character, Julia

College Autism Network
College Autism Network
Where we are now:

- Increased visibility of ASD
- Commitment to diversity and inclusion in higher ed
- Expectations of federal law (ADA)

A new era in higher ed
Students with Autism Coming to College

• Our focus is on High-Functioning Autism (Asperger Syndrome)
• Estimates range from 16,000 to 100,000 (depending on “diagnosis”)
• Around one-third of these students graduate
• College support ranges from *none* to comprehensive programs
Are there more ASD/AS students on campus?

- Absolutely…but not more people with Autism.
- More people diagnosed with ASD:
  - Clearer criteria, improved testing, more experienced diagnosticians
- Services available to children with this diagnosis are significantly better
ASD/AS Students Coming to College

• The “service cliff”
  • IDEA v. ADA, the end of the IEP

• What parents hear vs. what we say
  • “Small, personalized, we know our students,” etc.
Why should we serve these students?

- Economic imperative: We want all of our students to be contributing members of our society
- Political imperative: Increasing federal and state expectations demand a response
- Moral imperative: Student affairs has always led higher education’s response to diversity and inclusion
"The Future of Neurodiversity"
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“Autism” generally refers to a developmental disorder that is most commonly characterized by certain traits that affect:

- Social interactions
- Language
- Behavior

It is a set of *adaptive* responses to the way the brain sees the world.
Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder and Asperger Syndrome
Diagnosis of ASD/Asperger Syndrome

• The DSM IV and V:
  • Impairments in social interaction
  • Impairments in communication; e.g. reading nonverbals
  • Repetitive behaviors and/or or overly-intense interest in topics; rigid thinking
  • A “spectrum” disorder
What is Autism Spectrum Disorder, cont.

- It is not a single disorder, but a spectrum of closely-related disorders with a shared set of characteristics.

- People who have been successful enough in high school to be college-curious, or college-capable, are usually considered to have "High-functioning Autism" (formerly known as “Asperger Syndrome”).
The Autism Spectrum
The Autism Spectrum

High-Functioning Autism

“Asperger Syndrome”
What is Autism Spectrum Disorder, cont.

- People with ASD may have below average, average, or above-average intelligence.
- A common cognitive profile is high verbal ability and below-average processing speed.
- Executive function deficits are common among the ASD/AS population, but also exist in others.
Executive function

- Planning and organizing
- Attention to detail
- Prioritizing actions and activities
- Ability to switch between tasks/make transitions
- Inhibit/edit behavior
What Causes Autism?

• It is brain-based and hard-wired (physiological differences are visible in the brain)
What Causes Autism?

- It is brain-based and hard-wired (physiological differences are visible in the brain)
- It may be evident at birth or shortly after
- Genetic predisposition is likely, but does not explain all cases
- It cannot be “cured” in the conventional sense, but early intervention makes a difference in later experience
Common Traits of “Asperger Syndrome”
Don’s List

1. Finger-flicking
2. Change in routine is hard
3. Very particular about food
4. Smells can cause anxiety, nervousness
5. Noises, too
6. Hyperfocus on a subject
7. Likes to wear the same thing
8. Doesn’t always get sarcasm
9. Doesn’t tolerate crowds well
10. Talks really fast
## Don’s List

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Two key challenges

**Perspective**

- Students on the spectrum often have difficulty seeing “the big picture” and sometimes get bogged down in the details.

**Proportion**

- Students sometimes have an unreasonable reaction to a situation.
Co-morbidity rates of depression and anxiety are extremely high due to:

- Environmental rigidity and difficulty processing social information
- The impact of peer rejection
- Social anxiety may *increase with age* for high-functioning ASD youth compared to neurotypical controls

- Pinder-Amaker, S. (2014)
Stress leads to anxiety and depression
Three broad traits/theories

- Central Coherence
- Landscape Salience
- Theory of Mind
Three broad traits/theories

Central Coherence

Landscape Salience

Theory of Mind
Central coherence: “The ability to derive meaning from a mass of details”

<table>
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<th>Problem seeing the big picture:</th>
<th>Questionable common sense:</th>
<th>Misinterprets and misjudges:</th>
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<td>• Cannot always see the global issue, the implications of actions</td>
<td>• Difficulty reading context</td>
<td>• Cannot read between the lines</td>
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<td>• Difficulty seeing invisible relationships</td>
<td>• Takes things literally</td>
<td>• Misses the “gist” of interaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>• For people with ASD, whole is the sum of its parts.</td>
<td>• Doesn’t “get it”</td>
<td>• Difficulty with multiple meanings</td>
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Making sense of the scene, making sense to others
Landscape Salience

- Attempts to explain why certain sensory inputs elicit a seemingly inappropriate or over-the-top emotional response.
Landscape Salience

Typical Child

1. Sensory information is relayed to amygdala
2. Child exhibits appropriate emotional response

Child with Autism

1. Altered connection between visual cortex and amygdala distorts child’s response
2. Amygdala triggers autonomous nervous system, raising heart rate
3. Child looks away to reduce distress
Theory of mind

• The ability to infer the full range of mental states and emotions in other people
• It allows us to understand that mental states could be the cause of action in others...
• Which then allows us to predict behavior.
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College Autism Network
What challenges do ASD/AS present on campus?

- Roommate difficulties
- Conduct issues
- Student organization interactions
- Classroom behavior concerns
- Marginalizing by other students due to lack of understanding
- Extensive use of campus services (advising, counseling, disability)
- Attrition
What does this look like in the classroom?

- Communication can seem odd or different:
  - Talks too much, goes on and on about a topic
  - Struggles with abstract concepts and different perspectives

- Can be challenged by assignments:
  - Seeks very specific instructions, is challenged by vague or flexible tasks
  - Work may not be turned in on time, or at all
  - Generalizing skills and concepts is difficult

- The social aspect of class may be stressful or difficult to manage
  - Working in small groups
  - Presenting in front of class
  - Critiquing others’ work, or being critiqued
What does this look like outside of class?

- Residential living challenges
  - Sensory sensitivities
  - Social cues and unspoken rules of social life
  - Roommate challenges/floor and hall interactions can be difficult

- Student activities
  - Seeks social interactions through organizations and activities, but communication and social differences cause conflicts

- Student conduct
  - Often accused of stalking or other unwanted attention
  - Follows rules...but not necessarily the ones we know
Challenges of serving ASD students

• Thinking and imagination challenges:
  • Rigid thinking: may find it difficult to accept alternatives or respond when things are not as expected.
  • Difficult to think ahead and guess what’s going to happen next.
  • Lack of understanding of another student’s actions.
A fairly simple equation:

Knowledge (your brain’s “files”) 
+ Observation 
= Pretty good guess about outcomes
Challenges serving ASD students

- Communication challenges:
  - It may take longer for people with ASD to understand what’s being said.
  - People with ASD may take things VERY literally.
  - It is often difficult to explain what they want or what they mean.
Excitement? Maybe not.
Case Studies: What are the challenges?
AN ORGANIZING QUESTION:

• A common characteristic of people on the Autism Spectrum is that they are “rule-followers.” Why, then, do they end up challenged by what’s expected of them?
Answer:

• They are following rules; just not yours.

• Remember: Autism is a set of adaptive responses to the way the brain sees the world.

• “Rigid thinking” makes adaptation (rule-switching) VERY difficult.
How “neurotypical” people may look to those on the Autism Spectrum

- Overly social, talk too much
- Obsessed with fashion, grooming
- Easily distracted, unable to focus for very long
- Want to talk about random things instead of interesting things
Learning Outcomes

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Some strategies that may help:

- Focus on the behavior, but...
- Never assume you know the rationale behind the behavior.
- Understanding that rationale is often the key to unlocking the problem.
- Remember that lying is difficult (but not impossible) for someone with ASD.
The first question is always:
Do you know why you’re here?
Three sources of reassurance for ASD students

• Rules: Rather than respond to a fluid environment, people with autism often rely on “rules” to structure their activities, so...
  • Provide “rules” for a situation, e.g. “When you eat in a dining hall, you have to wait your turn to get your food.”

• Routine: Predictability and stability are important; interruptions to routine can cause stress, so...
  • Support a student’s routine, rather than encourage them to “be flexible.”

• Prediction: Surprises are stress-inducing, so...
  • “We are going to have a guest speaker tomorrow who will show a short video and then discuss it, and you will have an opportunity to ask questions”
From Aspergers 101 (Facebook group)

Tips for the Aspergers Driver When Being Pulled Over by an Officer

For many with Autism a fear of driving stems from anxiety that can result from being pulled over by an officer of the law. In some cases, fear of just that very...
From Aspergers 101:

Things to remember when you are pulled over:

- Do not panic (deep breaths)
- Do not get out of your vehicle
- Wait for the officer to approach you
- Roll down your window and listen to what the officer tells you to do
- Keep your hands on the steering wheel
- Be polite
- Wait for the officer to tell you what to do (get your license/proof of insurance) then do it
- Sign the appropriate form if the officer tells you to do so
How to help

• Be a detective. Ask questions in a non-judgmental way ("why" is almost always judgmental).
• E.g., “What makes you want to sit next to Ellen in class?”
• E.g., “How was it helpful to see Paulo’s early work? What parts of his work did you use?”
• E.g., “Can you tell me about eating in the lounge? Walk me through it.”
Good executive function coaching questions

• When have you felt most comfortable here on campus?
• What do you wish people understood about you?
• What are you most proud of about being here at college? What frustrates you the most?
• Who has been helpful to you here, and what did they do that was helpful?
The ASPERGER’s EXPERTS

Aspergersexperts.com

• Show genuine interest in student’s perspective/reasons/concerns/interests.
• Recognize “defense mode” (fight-or-flight response to stress that shuts down higher cognitive functioning).
Check yourself for:

- Annoyance
- Eye contact bias
- Impatience
- The “Motivation Question”
Thinking about your office/space

- Lighting, sound, distractions.
- "Fidgets" are valuable tools.
When giving directions:

- Be as objective as possible. Watch for your own “niceness bias.”
- “Chunk” directions into small pieces.
- Write things down, even what seems obvious to you.
- Ask the student to repeat back to you what you’ve said.
- Predict, or “storyboard” possible outcomes of their actions (including sanctions).
When offering feedback

• Be very direct; no sugar-coating
• Don’t dismiss sensory sensitivities as petty or as a choice
Working together:

• Policies must include VERY detailed definitions. E.g., “unwanted attention” is unclear.

• Suggest to both ASD students and the staff who work with them:
  • TRY DIFFERENTLY, NOT HARDER!
Head problems off at the pass

• Consider a “diversion program.”
  • Have 1 or 2 staff members very knowledgeable about ASD and EF disorder to do one-on-one coaching over several weeks or months.
Helping educate other students, faculty and staff

• All of us benefit from these strategies, so not necessary to label anything “Autism”-related.

• CRITICAL that people understand that vague or ambivalent or sugar-coated instructions are problematic for some students.
  • Role-play with concerned peer (maybe faculty) what a conversation will be and how it will feel.

• Faculty instructions should be written down, repeated, checked for comprehension.
And for training and supervision:

• Make understanding “neurodiversity” a goal for your campus.
• Invite experts on ASD to speak to RAs, orientation leaders, professional staff.
• Educate yourself (TED Talks, videos and websites, etc.).
Changing the conversation

- High-functioning Autism is not inherently a disability.
- Neurodiversity is as valuable to a college community as other types of diversity.
- It is not the sole responsibility of disability services staff to support the success of ASD students.
- Success on the Autism Spectrum is a win for everyone.
Useful resources

College Autism Network website:  www.collegeautismnetwork.org

- RA Training Module

- Videos found by Googling “Autism” and “Asperger”
- Aspergers101.com (like them on Facebook)
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• Videos found by Googling “Autism” and “Asperger”
• Aspergers101.com (like them on Facebook)
• NASPA general session, Monday at 2:30: Students with Autism: Lessons from the Field
More time to read? Some good books:

- *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity* by Steve Silberman
Lead institution: Rochester Institute of Technology
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• Economic imperative: We want all of our students to be contributing members of our society

• Political imperative: Increasing federal and state expectations demand a response

• Moral imperative: Student affairs has always led higher education’s response to diversity and inclusion
Please fill out our card!!
(We will email you in a couple of months, if that’s okay)
Contact information

• Slides available at collegeautismnetwork.org and NASPA conference site

• Email me at lee@collegeautismnetwork.org