Students with autism are coming to college...

- By the year 2020, as many as 433,000 students with autism will be enrolled in college.
- The number of college students with autism is growing at a rate faster than nearly any other demographic.

With potential for success, especially in STEM fields...

- Many individuals with autism achieve academically at the same or higher levels than their typical peers, and would likely succeed at the college level with appropriate support.
- Students on the autism spectrum may be particularly well-suited for success in STEM fields due to their ability to observe, identify, construct, and apply logical systems of reasoning.

But statistics highlight current difficulties.

- Between now and 2025, there will likely be 800,000 to 1.1 million high school completers with autism who will NOT earn a college credential.
- There are likely millions of adults (age 25+) with autism who never went to college.

Challenges at Multiple Levels

- **Individual**:
  - Social, communication, transition
  - Academic, independent living
- **Institution**:
  - Lack of data, “someone else’s problem”
  - Inefficient coordination across units
- **System**:
  - IDEA vs ADA legal foundation
  - Minimal transition planning in K-12
- **Society**:
  - Misunderstandings; pop-culture assumptions
  - Stigmatization; low expectations

In this issue brief:

- Highlights from the first article in top-tier higher education journal to ever mention autism.
- A new model to help students and institutions anticipate, address, and overcome challenges that might otherwise undermine the chances of success for college students with autism.
- Description of $300,000 grant from the National Science Foundation: “Autism-Related Characteristics in College STEM Students: Prevalence, Performance, and Mediation.”
- Links to additional resources including handouts, slides, literature reviews, news stories, and more!
Abstract
Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are completing high school with reasonable expectations for postsecondary success. College educators are likely ill prepared to provide appropriate support for these students. Based on personal interviews with a diverse group of students with autism, this study (a) amplifies these students’ voices, (b) describes tensions between their public and private identities, (c) outlines the academic, social, emotional, self-advocacy, and communication challenges they face in college, and (d) proposes both general principles and specific practices that could be leveraged to facilitate postsecondary success for students with autism.

Finding #1: Pragmatic Disclosure
Students in this study took a practical approach to a tangible behavioral choice: whether, and when, to disclose their autism diagnosis to others. In academic settings, students typically revealed their diagnoses only as needed to acquire formal accommodations from the postsecondary institution. In regards to their peers, most students waited until circumstances or another person’s actions brought their diagnosis to the surface.

Finding #2: Identity Development
The interviews also revealed an internal tension regarding the manner in which autism fits into students’ sense of personal identity. Decisions to publicly disclose their autism, or to seek formal accommodations, were merely the outward manifestations of an ongoing internal identity development process for each student. Students who received their autism diagnosis early in life expressed greater comfort with themselves and a more positive sense of identity.

Implications
Due to the holistic nature of symptoms that affect students’ cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains of development, students with ASD may need support services that cross over traditional structural/operational boundaries between institutional offices. To help develop campus climates of inclusion in which students feel safe to teach and learn about student differences, faculty, staff, and students in higher education can adopt new mindsets:

• Spectrums are not binary: Autism is a spectrum; disability is not a binary construct.

• Diversity includes disability: Students with (both hidden and visible) disabilities offer distinct perspectives.

Journal of College Student Development publishes first article in top-tier higher education journal to ever mention autism
**Abstract**

Ten years ago, 1 in 150 8-year-old children was diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. Today, the number is 1 in 68. Ten years from now, when this year’s 8-year-olds turn 18 and look to make the transition to college, their ranks will include more students with autism than ever before. The forthcoming influx of college students with autism would create “a considerable challenge for which [colleges and universities] may be ill-prepared” (White, Ollendick, & Bray, 2011, p. 697).

To help campuses better prepare for the increasing number of individuals with autism likely to come to college over the next ten years, this study draws data from a series of in-depth interviews with students on the autism spectrum to gain a better understanding of these students’ experiences in college, and the mechanisms through which institutions of postsecondary education could facilitate these students’ success. Using a three-phase grounded-theory approach to analyses, we concluded that campuses can do more than just respond to a specific incident when a specific student asks for specific accommodations under a specific legal authority. Colleges and universities can use the model derived from this study to take proactive steps to facilitate the success of college students with autism.

**Moving Beyond the Disability Service Center**

Disability service centers may be the natural starting place when considering how an institution facilitates the success of its students with autism. Moreover, having a specific advisor (or “case worker” of sorts) for students with autism could serve as a consistent point of contact for neurodiverse students and would be an enormous benefit in helping them navigate institutional processes and structures. Even without the resources to implement specialized positions, institutions can still make subtle changes to support students with autism.

**Getting Ahead of Predictable Problems**

Because many institutions have adopted similar “standard operating procedures” in various functional areas (e.g., orientation, housing, student conduct), institutions can proactively take steps to “get ahead of predictable problems” by anticipating which of their standard practices are most likely to cause tension for students with autism. The seemingly interminable series of social interactions required during most orientation sessions, for example, may be overwhelming for autistic students. Living with a roommate, completing group assignments, and joining student organizations can likewise be uniquely challenging for students with autism. Thankfully, simple, straightforward adjustments (e.g., the establishment of small groups who remain together throughout orientation; specific procedural guidelines for resolving roommate conflicts) would not only facilitate success for students with autism, but would also benefit countless other students who do not have (or do not disclose) any disabilities.

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**ASHE paper presents new model to facilitate college success for students with autism**

Autism-Related Characteristics in College STEM Students: Prevalence, Performance, and Mediation

The study funded by a three-year, $300,000 award from the National Science Foundation (NSF) examines how autism-related characteristics influence student performance in traditional “gateway” courses for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) majors. The study is set to become the largest ever conducted on autism-related characteristics among college students in the United States.

Roughly 1 in 3 college students with autism pursue a major in STEM fields (Wei, Yu, Shattuck, McCracken, & Blackorby, 2013). Characteristics sometimes associated with autism - like the ability to observe, identify, construct, and apply logical systems of reasoning - mean students with autism may be particularly well-suited for work in STEM fields (Barron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Burtenshow, & Hobson, 2007; Chiang & Lin, 2007; Jones et al., 2009; Wei, Christiano, Yu, Wagner, Spiker, 2014). Other characteristics often associated with autism - like rigid patterns of thought or anxiety associated with social awkwardness (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Lainhart, 1999) - might interfere with students’ success in high-stress gateway courses like Calculus or Chemistry.

Moreover, the majority of students with autism-related characteristics do not seek formal accommodations from their institutions’ disability service office (Cai & Richdale, 2015; Cox et al., 2017; Roberts, 2010). The NSF study will examine the possibility that these already existing but underutilized interventions could serve as low-cost, high-yield mechanisms that help college students with autism complete their degrees, enter the workforce, and contribute to the national economy.

Project Goals

(1) Determine the prevalence of autism-related characteristics among college students entering STEM fields; (2) Assess the effect of autism-related characteristics on student performance in gateway STEM courses; and (3) Evaluate the effect of formal disability accommodations on the classroom performance of STEM students with autism-related characteristics.

Additional Resources on college students with autism.
Student vignettes, presentation slides, literature reviews, news stories, and more!

- Current institutions with autism-specific initiatives: [http://collegeautismnetwork.org/institutional-initiatives](http://collegeautismnetwork.org/institutional-initiatives)
- Resident assistant (RA) training curriculum: [http://collegeautismnetwork.org/ra-training-module](http://collegeautismnetwork.org/ra-training-module)
- Brief literature reviews: [http://collegeautismnetwork.org/research/literature-annotations](http://collegeautismnetwork.org/research/literature-annotations)

Presentation Slides


Learn More about the NSF study using these links


Stay Informed about news, resources, and research findings by signing up for our email newsletters.

- [http://collegeautismnetwork.org/about/can-mailing-list/](http://collegeautismnetwork.org/about/can-mailing-list/)

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