Students on the Autism Spectrum:

Responding to a Growing Population
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)

Increased familiarity with ASD, related diagnoses and common characteristics

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

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 in a student conduct office?
Case Studies

• 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
TV's newest efforts to portray autism
Where we are now:

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

A new era in higher ed

College Autism Network
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”
Today’s plan

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What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

“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

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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
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)
CONTROL GROUP

AUTISM GROUP

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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
Aspie World: Common Traits of Asperger’s

• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDwXqGjohGg&t=27s
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”

**Problem seeing the big picture:**

- Cannot always see the global issue, the implications of actions
- Difficulty seeing invisible relationships
- For people with ASD, whole is the sum of its parts.

**Questionable common sense:**

- Difficulty reading context
- Takes things literally
- Doesn’t “get it”

**Misinterprets and misjudges:**

- Cannot read between the lines
- Misses the “gist” of interaction
- Difficulty with multiple meanings
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

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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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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
  - “Meltdowns”
  - Gets into arguments with peers or authorities over seemingly small issues
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 in a student conduct office?
**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
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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.
Anna’s wisdom

• For a student with autism, articulating what they want or need is hard
• Parents’ attitudes toward autism make a big difference
• All kids on the spectrum have been bullied in elementary school
• Students on the spectrum are just as easily embarrassed as anyone, so don’t call them out publicly.
• The clearer the instructions, the better.
For starters

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)
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.”

Tip: “What were you thinking?” should actually be a question and not a statement.
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!
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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 with a struggling or problematic student 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](http://www.collegeautismnetwork.org)

- RA Training Module
- Videos found by Googling “Autism” and “Asperger”
- Aspergers101.com (like them on Facebook)
Aspergers 101

Introduction to Aspergers and High-Functioning Autism

Autism is described as occurring on a spectrum because the symptoms can vary from a complete lack of communication with others to difficulty...
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- ASCA general session, Friday at 12:45: Autism and the Student Conduct Process: Support Begins With Understanding
More time to read? Some good books:
Lead institution: Rochester Institute of Technology
**Articles by Lee**

- Inside Higher Ed, Feb 8, 2018: *The Nexus of Autism and Title IX*
- Inside Higher Ed, Dec 12, 2014: *Rethinking Everything... Literally*
- About Campus, July/August 2016: *440 Pearl Street: Autism on (and a Block Away From) Campus*
Upcoming webinars

- March 22, 3 pm: Working With Students on the Autism Spectrum (hosted by Innovative Educators)

- April 19, 12 pm: Title IX, Student Conduct and Autism (hosted by the Ohio Department of Higher Education; OH residents only)
And for Disability/Autism Specialists:

College Inclusion Summit
November 5-7, Burlington VT
(co-sponsored by the College Autism Network, University of Vermont and Mansfield Hall)
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
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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
• Email me at lee@collegeautismnetwork.org