# Advising Students on the Autism Spectrum

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The following information has been compiled from our training by a nationally known autism expert Dr. Jane Thierfeld Brown (Assistant Clinical Professor at Yale Child Study, Yale Medical School, Director of College Autism Spectrum), professional experiences working with this student population, and these sources:

## The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal:

- *Advising Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Best Practices for Student Success. Dana Clark, University of St. Thomas (2016)*

## National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) Clearinghouse Resource website – section on Autism:

- *Advising Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Khrystyna Bednarchyk (2014)*

## Swarthmore College Academic Advising and Support webpage:

- *Students on the Autism Spectrum (2017)*

# Workshop Goals:

- Define Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Provide brief overview of K–12 and College disability laws/educational experiences
- Identify commonly occurring manifestations of ASD and strategies to work effectively with these students
- Outline things to consider while assisting this population with their course schedules

# What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

- Person-first language is preferred
  Student with Autism instead of ~~Autistic Student~~

- A neurodevelopmental disability characterized by social interaction deficits, weakness in executive functioning, and impaired communication skills.

- Asperger's has recently been absorbed into the Autism Spectrum Diagnosis.

- Common Co-morbid Disorders: Anxiety, Depression, ADHD, OCD, Tourette's

- It does not affect intelligence levels – in fact most people on the spectrum are quite brilliant!

# Why Do Advisors Need to Know About This Population?

- New diagnosis guidelines – Symptoms previously overlooked or misdiagnosed

- Increase in early intervention at toddler/preschool level = More special education/resource room use

- Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 created transition programs in high schools nationwide

<u>All adds up to increased enrollment in higher education</u> *(Typically attracted to art, math, and computer science fields)*

# Educational Assistance Comparison

## K–12

- Structured day
- Resource room
- Personal/Classroom aides
- Homework help in school
- Parental involvement
- Special education team and teacher meetings
- IEP/504 plans
- Limited access to teachers outside of school day

## College

- Variable schedule
- Lots of free time
- Tutoring
- Notification form for faculty provided only to students registered with disability office
- Ability to contact professors anytime and **vice versa**

# Legal Differences

## K–12

- IDEA/504
- Success
- Parent driven
- School must identify and test
- Academic, behavioral, environmental accommodations and modifications

## College

- ADA/504
- Access
- Student driven
- Student must identify and provide documentation
- Academic accommodations

# Typical Academic Accommodations for Autism

- Reduced course load while maintaining full time status

- Priority registration to get classes during best academic/behavioral performance time frames

- Preferential assigned seating

- Notetaker

- Permission to record lecture

- Alternative homework deadlines

- Extended time to complete tests

- Test taking in a separate location

- Frequent breaks are allowed

- Assistive technology

**They cannot get these accommodations without registering with your campus disability office!**

*Please Note: While academic accommodations must be made according to the law, the modifications made will never compromise academic standards/course expectations.*

# Students *May* Exhibit

- Difficulty understanding/expressing emotion or inexplicable emotional reactions

- Abnormal/no response to verbal cues during conversation

- Limited eye contact

- Preference for being alone/Find small talk annoying

- Bluntness/Argumentative or Rude

- Self-Regulating Behaviors(vocalization, repetitive body movements, playing with certain objects)

- Atypical reactions to communicate frustration (inappropriate anger/language)

- Impulsivity

- Marked physical over activity (flicking, tapping, rocking)

- Poor hygiene

*Please note: Harmless, non-disruptive, or "odd" behaviors*
*do not need to be directly addressed unless they become abusive or disruptive.*

# Challenges Students *May* Face

- Problems with executive functioning (organization, assessing priorities, time management, coping with stress, maintaining motivation)
- Issues understanding expectations and breaking them down into manageable steps
- Inflexibility makes change distressing
- Low tolerance for frustration
- Difficulty problem solving/making decisions
- Hard time grasping larger context/abstract concepts due to interpreting things literally

*(continued)*

# Challenges Students _May_ Face

- Preoccupation with own ideas causes difficulty focusing (restrictive patterns of thought)
- Acting overconfident about information they do not understand/Correcting others
- Writing lack coherence, focus, and logical order
- Hard time collaborating with others because they can't see from other's perspectives
- Difficulty mixing with peers due to inability to understand their feelings(lack of empathy)
- Going on "tangents"/Easily distracted
- Problems following multipart directions

# Potential Erratic Behavior Triggers

- **Unexpected Changes** (fire drill, furniture is moved, adjustments to meeting time, new front desk person)

- **Sensory Stimuli** (strong odors, bright colors/busy patterns, uncomfortable seating, loud/distracting noises, room temperature)

- **Stress/Frustration from other sources**

*(Adapted from Monroe Community College Pamphlet)*

# Strategies For Engagement

- Reduce distractions as much as possible by maintaining a well-structured environment *(Try to remain non-judgmental during an outburst and provide opportunity to regroup)*

- Attempt to keep up a routine with minimal changes

- Recognize that co-morbid conditions may affect the approach you take with each individual

- When they disclose:
  - ✓ Remember it is confidential
  - ✓ Ask what you can do to support them.
  - ✓ Encourage registering with disability office and walk them through the steps.

*(continued)*

# Strategies For Engagement

- Offer the option for phone or video chat appointments instead of face-to-face
- **Direct communication** (announce things in advance)
- Clearly stated behavioral expectations and procedures for your appointments (written and verbal Do's and Don'ts Rules)
- Briefly explain the purpose of your expectations
- **Time Cues** (clock, timer)
- White board of items to cover during session
- **Avoid sarcasm, subtle hints and other communication that could be misinterpreted**

*(continued)*

# Strategies For Engagement

- Ask the student which strategies have worked in the past (e.g. making lists, drawing charts, fidget toys to stay focused)
- Plan for a break at a certain time
- **Make sure they write things down/take pictures with their phone**
- Discuss social norms/expectations (scripts)
- Role model the use of organizational tools by explaining how you are using them (calendar, email)
- **Interrupt any disruptive behaviors/Redirect responses** (firm, concise e.g. You must sit on your chair the correct way in my office or I will ask you to leave.)

# Effective Advising Approach

Open-ended "Describe your dream job/life" questions do not work!

Parents may have been their advocate for so long, they don't know how to do it themselves!
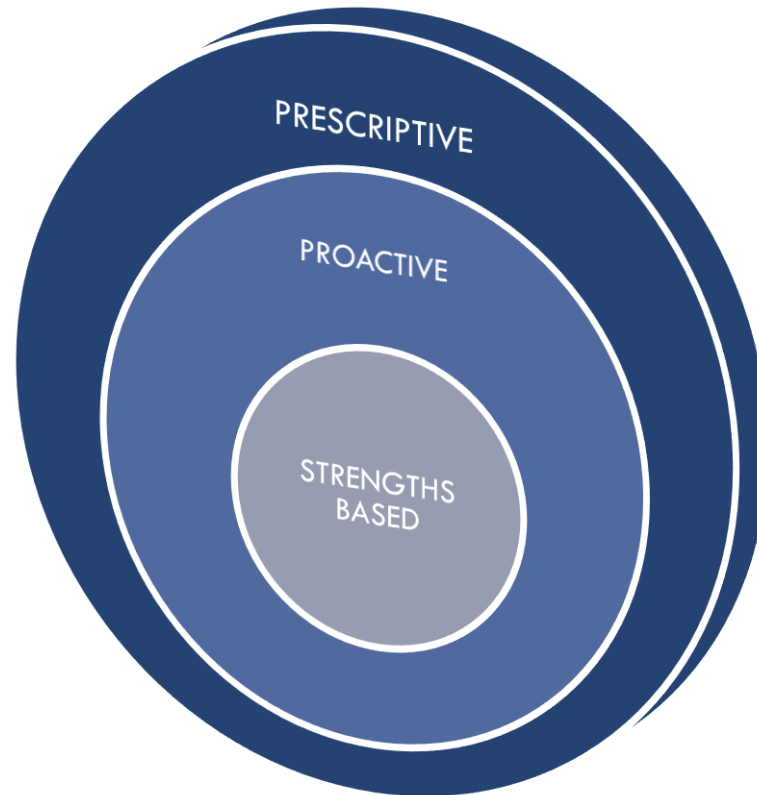


May need help identifying why they are in school and what they want to achieve!

# Prescriptive

- Be specific and concrete. They need literal step–by–step instructions for reaching their academic goals.

- Point out typical obstacles they may face and discuss <u>specifically</u> how to prepare for them.

- Timelines are extremely helpful for registration. Even if your department already has a printed or online guide, you will need to get even more detailed for these students.

*(Adapted from Clark, 2016)*

# Prescriptive

✓**WHO** – Which people will they need to meet with before they can confirm their schedule?

✓**WHAT** – Give blank examples of the forms they will need to fill out and go over the instructions together

✓**WHERE** – Detailed directions for getting to and from the different departments

✓**WHEN** – Specific deadlines and suggestions for when to get started on the process; how often they occur; review the academic calendar together

✓**WHY** – Explicit reasons why each step must be completed

✓**HOW** – Is it completed wholly online? Are there things to sign? Who else needs to be involved? How do they decide which course to take? In what ways will you be there to assist them?

# Proactive

- Set up necessary appointments in advance of other students.

- Keep records of meetings/tasks assigned.

- Check in regularly for follow through.

- Forward your department reminders to the student again with a personal message.

- Reach out during times of peak stress such as mid–terms/final exams.

*(Adapted from Clark, 2016)*

# Strengths Based

- When you are focused on all of the things you need to pay attention to while working with this population, it is easy to lose track of their strengths during your appointments.

- You can use the same advising techniques as you do with the majority of the student population to assess their strengths, but you may need to work harder to find out what they enjoy doing/are good at doing since there is usually a lack of small talk.

*(Adapted from Clark, 2016)*

# Considerations While Creating Course Schedules

- Information in advance preferred, but not legally covered by ADA:
  - ✓ program design
  - ✓ class structure
  - ✓ instructor expectations

- Do not overload credits

- Be aware of the best time of day for them to be focused and alert

- Discourage back to back classes

- Pay attention to technical requirements for classes

- Avoid courses with heavy group work components

- Multiple writing intensive courses in one semester is not advised

- Instructor personality and teaching methods

# Effective Referrals

- Explain reason for referral/outcome
- Break down process of meeting with new person
- Guide question creation
- Make the phone call with the student
- Walk them over if possible

*The NACADA website has a great article with detailed strategies called Tips on Making Effective Referrals in Academic Advising by Jack Roundy.*

# Support on Your Campus

- Disability Support Services Office
- ADA/504 Coordinator
- Tutoring/Learning Center
- Counseling Office

# When in Doubt, Always Be…

*Calm*

*Clear*

*Concise*

*Consistent*

# Supplementary Resources

- National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) website – *https://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Advising-Students-with-Autism.aspx*
- Students with Asperger Syndrome: A Guide of College Personnel. E. Wolf, Ph.D.; Jane Thierfeld Brown, Ed.D; and G. Ruth Kukiela Bork, M.Ed
- RIT Spectrum Support Program: rit.edu/studentaffairs/ssp

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Questions May be Addressed to:

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# Thank You All for Attending!