



Academic Supports for College Students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder: An Overview

Contributed by Marci Wheeler, M.S.W. and Brenda Chapin, B.A.

What is an Autism Spectrum Disorder?

- A neurobiological disorder
- Affects perception
- Communication challenges
- Social skills deficits
- Often suffers from high anxiety
- Sensory issues—easily under or over stimulated
- Organization and prioritization challenges
- Can affect motor skills (fine and gross)
- Exhibits uneven learning profile
- Presents differently in each individual

What will it Look like in the Classroom?

- Student may appear inattentive or bored
- May see ritualistic and repetitive behaviors (e.g., body rocking when stressed)
- Trouble staying on topic and maintaining conversation
- Literal interpretation of words
- Knowledgeable in subject areas of interest
- May display the opposite emotion when stressed (e.g., smiling when being corrected)
- Poor awareness of body space
- Difficulty manipulating small objects
- Organizational skills lacking
- Focused on one task at a time
- Difficulty working in groups

What are the Strengths of a Student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder?

- “Out of the box” thinkers
- Task oriented
- Reliable; once expectations understood
- Intelligent
- Excellent visual-spatial skills
- Strong attention to detail
- Ability to maintain prolonged, intense focus on subjects of interest
- Motivated by strong interests
- Excellent long term and rote memory

What are the Challenges of a Student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder?

- May misread social cues, facial expressions learning and body language
- Social interactions and group work are stressful
- Stress relieving activities may make others uncomfortable (e.g., flapping hands, rocking)
- Intelligence and large vocabulary may hide communication challenges
- Sensory perceptions can interfere with (e.g., flickering lights and noises can be a distraction)
- Multi-tasking is extremely difficult
- Nebulous sense of time
- Difficulty with changes and transitions

What Can I Do to Help Support this Student’s Learning?

- Provide quiet areas for learning and test taking
- Respect student’s chosen level of eye contact
- Allow more time for work assignments
- Provide a note taker or instructor’s notes
- Provide step by step written instructions
- Allow use of a computer for in-class work
- Allow for sensory or comfort items
- Provide hands on learning and visual aids
- Provide peer mentors to check in with student
- Allow extra transition time
- Allow for adjustments to seating placement
- When under stress, ask if the student would like to leave for a few moments
- Ask the student for suggestions