

PRACTICE BRIEF

Groundwork for Success: A College Transition Program for Students with ASD

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Abstract

This article describes the Transition Program implemented at a liberal arts college for newly enrolled students who have the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The diagnosis of ASD has risen dramatically; consequently, more students are arriving on college campuses with needs related to social pragmatic functioning. The Transition Program is designed to address the needs of this group with the following elements: early contact with students, early acclimation to campus, parent alliances, specialized academic advising and housing assignment, and ongoing support during the first year. The Transition Program is discussed in terms of meeting an emerging need in higher education and in terms of its portability to other institutions.

Keywords: Autism, postsecondary education, transition, college orientation

James: Recently graduated from high school, nineteen-year-old James is anticipating his new life at a mid-sized university. Diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as a child, James benefitted from special education services and supportive parents. With strengths in memory and computer applications, James has islands of capability. While his high school grades were excellent, James has difficulty with social pragmatics—the art of communication. If James finds the right combination of support, his strengths may flourish in college, but he and his family are not certain if he is ready for the transition or what kind of programming would serve him best. This article describes a college transition program designed to support students with ASD—like James.

Attaining a college education is a goal for many American high school students, and this goal brings both hope and uncertainty for students like James. The pressure and competition that strong students experience in their college application year is well known. Less well known is the growing trend for students with disabilities to seek postsecondary education. A national longitudinal study by the U.S. Department

of Education (2011) found that 60% of students with disabilities enrolled in a postsecondary institution compared to 67% of their neurotypical peers. Sixty-five percent of students with disabilities who graduate from high school attend an institution of higher learning; however, they complete fewer degrees than their peers (Newman et al., 2011), which suggests that there is room for improvement regarding service delivery for this diverse group.

Summary of Relevant Literature

ASD is a broad term including disorders formerly known as Asperger's syndrome, autism, and pervasive developmental disorder. As defined in the DSM 5, the central feature of ASD is a dysfunction in the social realm and the disorder ranges from mild to severe and occurs at all levels of intelligence (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Approximately four males are diagnosed with ASD for every one female and the gap expands with increasing intelligence (Rivet, 2011), suggesting that the college population with ASD is likely to be predominantly male.

With steadily increasing prevalence estimates, ASD is a fast growing member of the disability category. In 2014 the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported that the rate of diagnosis for individuals with autism spectrum disorder climbed to one in 68, which represents a 20% increase in two years (CDC, 2014). ASD has been a top research priority spurring significant discovery in the last decade, and recommended future directions include identifying the needs of adults with ASD (Damiano et al., 2014). Heightened awareness of ASD symptoms, improved special education programs in schools, and greater access to therapies and medications have likely contributed to a rise in numbers of college students with ASD, a trend that is expected to continue (Wolf, Brown, & Bork, 2009).

Institutions of higher education have the financial and ethical interest to retain admitted students, thus they offer programs to smooth the transition of first year students (College Board, 2011). Ninety-six percent of colleges report having formal orientation programs for their new students (Barefoot, 2005). Recognizing the importance of high school to college transition, institutions strive to create learning environments in which students can connect with peers, faculty, and staff, thus increasing the chances of persistence to graduation (Astin, 1984; DeAngelis, 2003; Spady, 1971; Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012; Tinto, 1975). Thematic programs stem from specific student needs and campus cultures. Variations now include outdoor adventure programs (Gass, Garvey, & Sugerman, 2003) and online programs (Cho, 2012; Dixon et al., 2012).

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education awarded \$11 million in grants to 27 postsecondary institutions to develop and assess transition programs for students with intellectual disability, some of whom also have ASD. No such program exists to study transition for students with ASD who have average or above average intelligence (Pinder-Amaker, 2014); however, it is hypothesized that advanced preparation, particularly in social skills, is essential for success of this group (Ciccantelli, 2011). The Transition Program described in this article serves students on the spectrum whose intelligence is within the normal range.

Depiction of Problem

Transitioning to the college environment can be challenging for all first year students, including those with disabilities, and making social connections is critical to their success (Shepler & Woosley, 2012). What happens when an individual has difficulty connecting with others because he or she struggles with a neurobiological disorder like ASD? A student like this may desire social acceptance and friendship but

be reluctant to approach and befriend others due to a personal history of social challenge. Areas of challenge for individuals who have a diagnosis of ASD include social reciprocity, reading social situations, empathizing, understanding the minds and motivations of others, sensory sensitivity, and engaging appropriately in social conversations (CDC, 2014; Pennington, Cullinan, & Southern, 2014). These challenges persist in college (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). In addition to social challenges, clinical anxiety is a challenge for many individuals with ASD, with co-occurrence estimates of 40% (van Steensel, et al, 2011). The hallmark difficulties of ASD can interfere with the development of social connections, thus specific programming to meet the needs of this group is critical for success.

Participant Demographics and Institutional Partners/Resources

This article describes a Transition Program that has been implemented at a small liberal arts college. Facilitated by a director, this specialized program operates within the framework of the larger college orientation run by the division of Student Affairs. Each year 25-30 students who have a documented ASD and normal intelligence, 85% of whom are male, participate in the program voluntarily.

Description of Practice: Transition Program for College Students with ASD

Entering college can be a challenge for someone like James with a student profile similar to the one described at the introduction of this article. While James's academic strengths will help him in class, his social challenges can undermine success if he does not find a niche. A transition program helps all students adjust, but it is of particular value to students like James who live with a condition that affects social functioning.

Empirical evidence about how to best facilitate the college success of learners with ASD is spotty (Pinder-Amaker, 2014); however, stepped-up transitional support as well as the coordination of pre-existing college services have been cited as a promising steps that institutions can take. For example, colleges typically offer disability services, mental health counseling, career counseling, and health services, each of which can meet key ASD-related needs (Longtin, 2014). The following six practices, adapted from our programming at a small liberal arts college (Landmark College, 2014), are presented as suggestions that postsecondary institutions could adopt. While these elements are designed to support students who have a spectrum condition, they may be helpful for other learners who are at-risk during the first year, too.

Six Transition Program Practices

1. Contact students and their parents before the beginning of the academic year
2. Acclimate small groups of students to campus early
3. Build alliances with parents
4. Select trained advisors
5. Predict and meet residential needs
6. Provide ongoing support during the first year

Contact students and parents early. Communicating with students before they arrive on campus can smooth the transition. Given the nature of ASD, students with this disorder may be less likely than their neurotypical peers to ask questions and discuss concerns related to the program and its expectations. Thus, it is helpful for the institution to initiate contact.

Students who enroll at the College are asked to disclose diagnosed conditions that may affect their learning. For students who self-identify as having ASD during the application process, early communication begins through the disability services office. College representatives share information and get to know students through a combination of telephone calls and online materials. This first step allows disability services to begin to coordinate resources, such as residential life, counseling, and health services, that the student will need when he or she arrives on campus.

Orient small groups to campus early. An early, small scale orientation in which students and families can navigate and see the campus and its support services is a critical element in the transition process for students with ASD. Allowing students and their parents to become familiar with the campus can reduce anticipatory anxiety and give students an early start in connecting with supports they may need or want. An early visit can include informational sessions on advising, wellness, residential life, as well as fun, social group-building activities.

Hiring successful students from the prior academic year to serve as orientation leaders can add credibility and perspective to orientation. In addition to acting as role models, student orientation leaders can share an insider's view on the "unwritten" social culture of the institution, potentially demystifying this aspect for new students. When possible, it may be beneficial to retain student orientation leaders to serve as mentors for students with ASD during their first year.

Build alliances with parents. Parent involvement in the college education of students in the millennial generation is high, and parent involvement for students

with ASD—or any learning difference—may be even greater. In *Students with Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for College Personnel*, Wolf et al. (2009) emphasize the importance of parent collaboration in the process of helping a student transition to college. Parents of students with ASD may have been advocating for their sons and daughters for years and they can provide insight and support for the transition to college (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012).

Given the role that parents can—and likely will—be playing in their son or daughter's education, it may be advantageous to speak with parents of incoming students. Because ASD manifests in a variety of ways, parents can provide useful background information on the student strengths and concerns. In addition to speaking with parents about the profiles of their students, it can be helpful to offer a disability-specific orientation session for parents. This session can preview the successes and stumbling blocks that are typically encountered for students with ASD during the first year and highlight the resources available on campus. Federal Educational Records Privacy Act (FERPA) guidelines for confidentiality must be followed; however, there is room within these guidelines for an appropriate exchange of information between the institution and parents.

Select trained advisors. It is advantageous to assign students with ASD to an advisor who understands the disorder, thus it may be helpful for disability offices to collaborate with advising staff who have a background in learning disabilities, special education, education, or related fields. Advisors who are well-matched to students who have ASD will understand how the disorder can affect academic outcomes, notice problems in their earliest stages, be willing to provide direct feedback on unconventional behavior, and encourage students to develop self-knowledge and self-advocacy skills. With increasing ASD awareness—both in academic research and in popular culture—there may be opportunities for advisors to bolster their background knowledge via speaker events, workshops, and symposia on ASD at the institution or in the wider community.

Predict and meet residential needs. The challenge of living in a shared space that all college students face may be magnified for students with ASD. Concerns related to the behavior of fellow residents, room cleanliness, shared bathroom space, laundry, and noise could arise for students with ASD. Because students with ASD can miss or misinterpret social cues, acclimation to the micro-culture of the residential space

can be a difficult process. Thus, steps to help undergraduates adjust to residential life norms and practices are particularly important for students with ASD. To support students with ASD during this transition, it may be beneficial to consider the following when making housing assignments:

- **Sensory load:** Many students with ASD experience heightened sensitivity to noise levels, types of lighting, and other stimuli. Reduced stimulation is often preferable. For example, carpeted spaces with incandescent lighting are often preferable to noisier tiled floors and fluorescent lighting.
- **Roommate selection:** When possible, pair students who have ASD with roommates who are able and willing to understand the manifestation of ASD. If the roommate possesses strong communication skills, the negotiation of minor issues like moving furniture, bedtimes, noise level, and other living space decisions will be smoothed.
- **Severity of symptoms:** While it is often preferable and practical to assign a student with ASD to room with another student, a single room may be considered for those students with the most intense symptoms. Singles can minimize the social stress of navigating close living relationship; however, this may not represent the optimal opportunity for social growth. Thus, the assignment of singles is best made on a case-by-case basis.
- **Experience of residential staff:** If possible, assign students to a residence hall with staff who have experience recognizing and working with ASD-related behavior.

Provide ongoing support during the first year.

In addition to the previous five suggestions that happen early in a student's transition to campus, it is beneficial to extend support after orientation to enhance the student's likelihood of a successful first year. If the institution offers organizational support, it may be possible to provide mentoring from students trained in the needs of students with ASD and to offer ongoing evening sessions on topics germane to the needs of students with ASD. "Television coaching" was used effectively to teach social skills to college students with ASD (Trammel, 2013) and digital resources could be used to develop and reinforce students' social skills year-round. Requiring less time and support, the disability office can compile a list of instructors who use a universal design approach to teaching and learning and

counselors who specialize in working with individuals with ASD, learning differences, and anxiety—this low-cost option may help students on the spectrum find useful campus resources that already exist.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

Although formal assessment has not been completed, the Transition Program described in this article has shown promising outcomes in terms of supporting students. In the first year, 30 students participated in the orientation program and their academic performance was tracked. Twenty-seven (90%) completed the first year and were eligible to enroll in the second year. For the same time period, 84% of all first year students at the institution completed year one. The cumulative first year GPA for participants in the Transition Program was 2.74, which was higher than the overall GPA of 2.58 for first year students at the institution. Thirteen participants earned a GPA of 3.0 or greater; 10 earned a GPA between 2.0 to 2.99; and four earned a GPA below a 2.0, which placed them on academic probation. These descriptive data indicate that students in the Transition Program achieved academic success at a level that was similar to their peers at the institution.

Anecdotally, students with ASD, their parents, and instructors at the College voiced satisfaction about the Transition Program. The institution has renewed the program after its first two years and early figures suggest that participating students are retained at a rate that meets or exceeds their peers at the institution.

A systematic research study is underway at the College to identify factors related to success for college students with ASD. The results of that investigation will contribute to knowledge about the transitional needs of this group and allow further refinements to the Transition Program. Specifically, investigators are correlating the executive function, anxiety, attentional, and intellectual profiles of incoming first year students who have ASD with their academic success in their first year of college. The goal of this research is to clarify successful and at-risk profiles within the college-bound ASD population so that services can be improved. For example, researchers intend to determine whether a clinical level of anxiety predicts academic success or failure for students with ASD. If anxiety predicts failure, then it would be important to increase screening and treatment services. If, however, anxiety is unrelated to academic performance, then institutional resources may be better used elsewhere. It is hoped that this discovery research will enable postsecondary institutions, families, and educational consultants to craft more effective transition plans for neurodiverse learners.

Implications and Portability

Providing specialized programs to support the transition to college for students with ASD requires financial support, time commitment, and resolve on the part of institutions and its members. The primary outcome could be increased retention and graduation of admitted students with ASD. This article contains practical suggestions for facilitating students' transition to college that can be adapted for different levels of institutional support. An interested faculty member or advisor may adopt one or two practices from these suggestions—or an institution may use the model described here as a launching point for its own full-scale ASD transition program.

From philosophical and practical standpoints, it is in the best interest of colleges and universities to provide programming that supports the successful transition of students with ASD. Ideals of access to a liberal education for all pervade the culture of colleges and universities in the U.S., which are often at the forefront of movements to expand access for historically marginalized groups. Thus, it makes sense for postsecondary institutions to ensure that all inquiring minds with cognitive potential can achieve success inside their doors. On the practical side, retention is a significant cost saver to the institution. Keeping a student in college until he or she graduates generally costs less than recruiting a new student to replace one who has left (Ackerman & Schribrowsky, 2007-2008). Strong retention rates are an excellent indicator that the institution delivers adequate services to its students, thus strengthening the reputation and appeal of the institution.

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