

**Teaching College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders**  
**By Kathy DeOrnellas PhD**

An increasing number of individuals are being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), particularly the higher functioning form of autism previously known as Asperger's disorder. Many of these individuals choose to attend college and it is no longer unusual to encounter them in your classes. Although they can be excellent students, those with ASD may come across as odd or eccentric with idiosyncratic behaviors and interests. This can make their presence in the classroom somewhat vexing for instructors who do not understand the challenges and strengths of these students.

**Characteristics of ASD**

Many students with ASD have social difficulties, including problems with verbal and nonverbal communication (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). They may be unable to understand others' points of view; have problems with taking turns in conversations (language pragmatics), speak in a loud or flat voice; and have problems understanding sarcasm, abstract language, and some forms of humor. In class, they may be preoccupied with certain subjects; inhibit other students by monopolizing class discussions; or may never speak at all. Students with ASD are comfortable being alone and often have difficulty reading social cues (APA, 2013). This is especially true in novel situations, such as the college classroom, and their behavior may seem stiff or unfriendly.

Students with ASD also have repetitive and restricted activities (APA, 2013). This can take the form of difficulty adjusting to change (i.e., change in assignments or seating arrangements) and sensory sensitivity (e.g., sensitivity to fluorescent lights, sounds, or smells). Time management can be difficult and students may lose track of time and miss class or arrive very early to ensure they get preferred seating (Dillon, 2007).

Although some of the previously mentioned characteristics may be considered problematic, there are a number of positive qualities associated with ASD. These students tend to be passionate about their areas of interest and pursue those areas with great enthusiasm. They "think outside the box," using original approaches to solving problems. Students with ASD tend to take rules seriously and take a dim view of rule-breakers. As learners, many have a wide vocabulary (particularly in their area of interest), are good visual and spatial learners, and have good memories (Jamieson & Jamieson, 2007).

Because of their strong interest in a particular area of study, students with ASD often have issues when taking courses in the core curriculum, particularly those that require abstract and higher-level thinking. Math courses, such as algebra or geometry, can be difficult; however, some students with ASD excel in math and major in engineering. Individuals with ASD tend to be literal thinkers who prefer nonfiction books on their area of interest. Literature and creative writing courses can be challenging.

**Recommendations for Teaching Students with ASD**

Many students with ASD do not advocate for themselves in college, but may be used to receiving accommodations in high school. Consider the following when teaching students with ASD:

If you have concerns about the student's ability to be successful in your class, schedule a meeting with the student to discuss your concerns—the earlier in the semester, the better. Send a summary of the meeting by email to help the student stay on track (Palmer, 2006).

Maintain a structured teaching style and clearly defined classroom expectations.

Due to graphomotor problems, the physical act of writing can be painful for some. Give students access to a note-taker and to your classroom notes— preferably a few days before class. Allow students to record lectures.

Give extended time on tests, particularly those requiring conceptual knowledge, and allow students to take tests in a room with few distractions.

Give progress reports midway through the semester. Many students with ASD have difficulty conceptualizing their progress in a course and are surprised by their final grades (Palmer, 2006).

Suggest that students schedule breaks between their classes or possibly take a lighter load so they will have time to mentally prepare.

Encourage students to meet with the campus Disability Support Office if you feel they need additional accommodations.

Finally, although easier said than done at times, do not become frustrated with these students. They are highly motivated to learn, and they want to be in college. They can be successful students, particularly in classes that are interesting to them. Getting them through the “uninteresting” classes can be challenging, but is worth the effort required.

#### References:

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: Author.
- Dillon, M. R. (2007). Creating supports for college students with Asperger syndrome through collaboration. *College Student Journal*, 41, 499–504.
- Jamieson, J., & Jamieson, C. (2007). *Managing Asperger syndrome at college and university*. New York, NY: David Fulton.
- Palmer, A. (2006). *Realizing the college dream with autism and Asperger syndrome*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley.

#### For Additional Information:

The College Program for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders – Marshall University:

<http://www.marshall.edu/collegeprogram/>

Supporting College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders – OASIS Program at Pace University

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kt-TOt9vaJk>

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<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/teaching-college-students-with-autism-spectrum-disorders/> )