ACADEMIC SUPPORTS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH AN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

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

“"I used to think adults spoke a different language... I think in pictures -Words are like a second language to me.”

Temple Grandin, Adult with Autism

Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders

- Autism is the fastest growing developmental disability with estimates of 1 in 80 children having an autism spectrum disorder (CDC, 2012)
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of students with an autism spectrum disorder, particularly Asperger Syndrome (AS), continues to grow rapidly
- It is clear that many students with AS have been present on college campuses but their disorders simply went unrecognized
- Despite the ADA, many students with AS are falling through the cracks and it is our job to seek more advanced training on our campuses
Autism: Knowing it when you see it:

- May see ritualistic/repetitive behaviors (i.e. body rocking when stressed)
- Trouble staying on topic and maintaining conversation
- Literal interpretation of words
- Difficulty understanding nonverbal/social cues
- Has sensory sensitivity/sensory integration problems
- Has a flat affect and unusual prosody
- Avoids eye contact
- Exhibits an unusual, awkward gait

How we see students with Autism on our campus:

- Student may appear inattentive or bored
- Knowledgeable in subject areas of interest
- Organizational skills lacking
- Focused on one task at a time
- Difficulty working in groups
- Difficulties with unexpected changes
- Preoccupation with a subject

What are the strengths of a student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder?

- “Out of the box” thinking
- Task oriented
- Reliable; once expectations understood
- Intelligent
- Excellent visual-spatial skills
- Strong attention to detail

- Ability to maintain prolonged, intense focus on subjects of interests
- Motivated by strong interest
- Excellent long term and rote memory
“Being autistic doesn’t mean being unable to learn. But it does mean there are differences in how learning happens.”

Jim Sinclair, Adult with Autism

What are the challenges of a student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder?

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

What can I do to help support the student’s learning?

- The functional limitations of each individual with AS determines the accommodations and support needed
- Most of the limitations have to do with the triad of impairments: social problem, communication problems, and intense interests and repetitive behavior
- Provide quiet area for learning and test taking
- Respect student’s chosen level of eye contact
- Allow more time for work assignments
- Provide a note taker, use of audio recorder, or instructors notes
- Provide step by step written instructions
- Allow use of a computer for in class work
- Allow for sensory or comfort items (e.g. headphones)
- Provide hands on learning and visual aids
- 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