

Transitioning ASD Students

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Leo Kanner first described Autism in 1943 and since that time Autism has not only evolved into a broad spectrum of similar symptoms as observed by Kanner: extreme autistic aloneness (1943, p. 242) and anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness (1943, p. 245) it has also grown in the number of persons diagnosed as being autistic. Today, Autism has an expanded definition, "...a range of complex developmental disorders that can cause problems with thinking, feeling, language, and the ability to relate to others" (American Psychiatric Association, 2015), moreover today 1 in 68 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015) children will be diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Dr. Stephanie Seneff of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology suggests that by 2025 that number could be one in every two children (Joss, L., 2014).

Autism is so prevalent in today's society that it has become its own culture. A culture that needs to be included in higher education demographics because more and more of these autistic individuals are thriving in their academic environments and they will make it to college. Indeed, the CDC states, "almost half of children identified with ASD has an average to above average intellectual ability" (2015). Moreover, Pinder-Amaker identifies "the number of students entering college with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders is expected to surge in the coming years" (2013, abstract). Yet despite this fact, children age out of the system every year, their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) terminated upon high school graduation and required thereafter to self identify to colleges and universities in order to receive any of the scant supports available.

This lack of available supports is due in large part to the absence of significant data in the research and literature. In Renn and Reason's text, *College Students in the United States*, a book devoted to student demographics, characteristics, experiences and outcomes there is

less than three pages devoted to students with disabilities and what is does contain is woefully inadequate, and focused more on mental health concerns than on cognitive disability, and there is absolutely zero mention of Autism Spectrum Disorder (2013). Pinder-Amaker points out, “More generally, the transition of youth with ASD... into postsecondary education has received sparse attention, and the mental health literature has done little to understand and address the considerable needs of this college-bound population” (2014, p. 128). A significant problem when faced with the burgeoning influx of this particular demographic to our colleges and universities. Of greater concern is the result of such a scarcity on research combined with an increase of those effected by ASD, which is a paucity of awareness and support for this student demographic.

Further complicating matters is the intersectionality of supports needed by this population. Not only is autism different for every individual diagnosed with an ASD but also each student will likewise identify with other myriad characteristics such as race, gender, sexuality and socioeconomic status. These characteristics represent barriers to college access, successful transition and ultimately retention and graduation rates thereby pooling ASD students into the at-risk cohort “Consequently, while many individuals with an ASD are intellectually capable of university level education, they will require a range of academic and supportive accommodations in order for them to succeed both educationally and in terms of transitioning to greater independence” (VanBergeijk, E, Klin, A., Volkmar, F., 2008, p.1359).

This poses difficulties not only for the students themselves but also for university administration, faculty and the general student population. Geller and Greenberg identify problems stemming from, core diagnostic features, including difficulty with social interaction

and relationship development, difficulty maintaining conversations, obsessive or disjointed thought processes and difficulty processing non-verbal communication cues. Further inhibiting to this group can be sensory issues, awkward motor skills and emotional dysregulation (2009, p. 93). Sperry and Mesibov contribute further insight, identifying difficulty maintaining interpersonal relationships, understanding appropriate behavior around the opposite sex and personal insight and a meaningful understanding of what it means to have an ASD as problems for college bound ASD students (2005). Indeed, in a 2014 study Matthews, Ly and Goldberg specifically set out to address college student's perceptions of peers with autism spectrum disorder and the stigmatization and feeling of alienation perceived by students labeled as having an ASD (2014). Furthermore, the research suggests that it is awareness that is needed. Students who displayed typical autistic traits were more readily accepted when their diagnosis was known by their peers, whereas students whose behavior came without explanation experienced non-acceptance and subsequent perception of alienation (Matthews, N., Ly, A., Goldberg, W., 2014).

These difficulties are complex and without a simple or single solution which inhibits definitive actions on the part of faculty and college administration who may not recognize the root cause of the issues they see, who may not know how to address the issues and further more may not be able to readily identify problems ASD students are having, especially in situations where these students have not self identified their disability. Gobbo and Shmulsky inquired among faculty the perceived greatest weaknesses and strengths of ASD students, faculty included mindblindness, (also known as empathizing and includes the ability to respond appropriately to others emotions), weak central coherence (an inability to make sense of the big picture, abstract or conceptual thinking, etc), and executive function (a lack

in goal persistence, cognitive dissonance and gratification delay) as greatest weaknesses (2014). They likewise identified specific subject matter expertise, desire to have and follow rules as well as an inherent need to be right as strengths for ASD students (Gobbo, K., Shmulsky, S., 2014). Yet despite faculty perceptions difficulties still remain for the ASD student population in whether to self identify, whether to seek assistance or resources and these difficulties are mirrored in the faculty who require greater understanding, innovative and flexible strategies as well as more universal supports in order to better serve this student population.

Compounding ASD specific issues and issues of identity intersectionality are general issues. The problems faced by every student who is adapting to new demands, new environments, and new pressures. The importance of campus community is crucial to student success and this fact is no different for a student with an ASD. Peer relationships are important, as are co-curricular and extracurricular experiences. When these relationships suffer, when interactions are either age or situationally inappropriate or inadequate, this can lead to anxiety, depression and reduced or abandoned involvement in peer or school related activities. Yet these obstacles are not insurmountable. While there is little empirical data there are many studies currently underway, seeking solutions to the problems identified within this student population.

In 2010 the U.S. Department of Education initiated the Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities. This program awarded grants to 25 universities to develop comprehensive programs for college students with cognitive disabilities, enabling them to gain access to academic enrichment, social activities, employment training, and assistance in establishing an independent living environment (2010). Pinder-Amaker

examines the concept of an Individualized College Plan (ICP), a version of the familiar Individualized Education Plan for students who are transitioning from high school to college in her paper, *Identifying the Unmet Needs of College Students on the Autism Spectrum*. Through careful assessment of each individual student a plan is crafted that assists in the continued academic and personal development of ASD students. This plan though individualized is neither solitary in its creation nor in its execution. It is team based, with direct input and involvement from the student as well as administration, faculty, peer-mentor, college-counselor, academic advisor, and parents among others (2014).

In addition to an Individualized College Plan, there are programs and initiatives that colleges have implemented to assist students transitioning into college, such as Taft College's Transition to Independent Living program, which houses students with cognitive and developmental disabilities in assisted living situations teaching them academics and how to live independently simultaneously (Taft College, 2015). A needed skill set for those with an ASD who often lack the executive thinking skills that allow them to organize their lives, conquer the challenges of daily living and maintain a high academic workload. Similarly, Mercyhurst University began the Asperger Initiative in 2008 to address the growing population of students diagnosed with an ASD. The program "is designed for student who, while exhibiting superior intellectual ability, face challenges in executive functioning and social interactions" (Mercyhurst University, 2015). Then there are the institutions that are fully comprehensive and cater to populations of differently-abled students. Less than a handful exist in the United States and Landmark College in Putney Vermont is one of them.

The Landmark College, in their own words, "acknowledges but does not accept the societal practice of labeling and stigmatizing students who learn differently. Every aspect of

the campus environment is designed to promote individual development and peer interactions that challenge the fundamental assumptions inherent in these labels that build on the strengths and talents that accompany different ways of learning” (Landmark College, 2015). Landmark understands the diverse and varying needs of each individual student and customizes learning strategies according to individual strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, they utilize every available technology to help students reach their academic and social goals.

Yet even with the proven success of programs such as those at Taft College and Mercyhurst University, and with the well-researched and successful methods of comprehensive colleges like Landmark there is still a vast chasm of inadequacies in serving cognitively disabled students in higher education. The programs for these students are few and far between, the resources can be hard to find and the requirements for utilizing them difficult to navigate, and many programs are simply inadequate to the multi-faceted challenges faced by this demographic.

Conclusion

Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis are continuing to rise, more than half of these students are capable of college-level work, yet “our support systems have been slow to respond to the needs of individuals with typical dreams and aspirations but atypical development” (Geller, L., Greenberg, M., 2009, abstract). Many obstacles lay in the path of ASD students and the challenges posed to supporting professionals are great. Moreover there exists a scarcity of research for adults and college age children with an ASD and current studies are largely incomplete but beginning to show emerging promise. The more that is done now to promote awareness, acceptance and inclusion as well as the development and initiation of transitional integrative programs for ASD students, the more prepared America’s

colleges and Universities, the more informed and better trained faculty and staff than the more successful the outcomes for the students and the universities they attend and the more independent, productive and satisfying lives these students can lead.

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