AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Engaging for Success: Coming Together to Support Our Students with Disabilities
Lisa Simpson
Department of Special Education
What is Autism?

- Autism is a neuro developmental disorder largely characterized by deficits in social interaction and communication.

- Individuals with autism also exhibit restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities

- Individuals with autism are frequently challenged by sensory input (noise, lights, touch)
What are the characteristics of a college student with ASD?

- Attending to social cues often biggest challenge
- Have difficulty entering – maintaining – and exiting conversations
- Social deficits impact friendships – romantic relationships – daily living activities – vocational success
- Lack of social problem solving
- May display lack of empathy
- Difficulty interpreting body language
- At same time may be keenly aware of their social difficulties – experience loneliness, rejection, low self esteem
- **Anxiety – Anxiety – Anxiety**
- Challenged by higher order problem solving
- Poor executive functioning skills - lack of organization - prioritizing
- May have limited ability to follow through on planned actions
What are some of the classroom challenges for someone with ASD?

- Asking for help
- Collaborating in groups
- Participating in discussions
- Difficulty managing a regular course load (may want to advise reduced course load)
- Unable to prioritize – set goals – break assignments into manageable parts
- Easily distracted
- Challenged to structure their schedule and assignments
- Experience anxiety
- Often have poor insight into how well they are doing in class – may think they are doing well when they are in fact not doing well
- May not recognize consequences of their decisions
- Difficulty sustaining attention in class and when working on assignments
How can faculty provide educational accommodations for students with ASD?

- Provide lecture notes and/or slides prior to class
- Allow use of a note taker or tape recorder
- Provide explicit instruction in how to organize study materials for class
- Provide clear expectations for submitted work
- **Do not assume student can generalize expectations from one assignment to the next**
- Large assignments broken into manageable units turned in separately – help student to plan and stay organized
- Specific instructions about when to begin researching a term paper, writing the rough draft, writing the final draft...
- Alternatives to group projects (may need individual assignment) – Instructor may need to facilitate group projects
- Challenged by assignments that involve speaking in front of the group - give presentation to instructor only
- Student may not read email - if that is how information about the class is relayed student may struggle to get that information
- Provide advance notice for any changes to normal class routine or schedule – check in with student to be sure he/she understands
- Testing accommodations: extra time to complete test (reduces anxiety – testing in separate room (reduces distractibility) – reduce sensory input (noise from florescent lights)
What other supports may students with autism need on campus?

- Social challenges – socially naïve don’t understand how to negotiate social situations – particularly dating and sexuality – may need explicit instruction
- May need explicit instruction in privacy and boundaries
- May need instruction in how to start conversations – join a club – interact in the cafeteria or dorm room – often need specific instruction for each area – skills don’t automatically transfer
- Limited insight into their own emotional states and emotional states of others – don’t recognize anxiety as anxiety – don’t know how to manage it
- Rely on consistency and routine – may need school staff to help establish these routines as often not able to establish effective routines on their own