
24 FACULTY TIPS FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

1. REMEMBER THAT EVERY INDIVIDUAL WITH ASD IS DIFFERENT

Individuals on the spectrum can range from entirely non-verbal to highly intelligent. Every student on the spectrum has different strengths, weaknesses, and interests and may require different classroom accommodations.

- It is probable (but not guaranteed) that a CP student who identifies as being on the spectrum has High Functioning Autism commonly referred to as Asperger's. Asperger's is defined as a developmental disorder characterized by impaired social skills, repetitive behaviors, and often, a narrow set of interests, but not involving delayed development of linguistic and cognitive abilities.
- If you notice a student is struggling, personally invite the student to your Office Hours to provide additional assistance.
- Try not to make assumptions about career interests. Approach students on the spectrum with an open mind. Asking about a student's hobbies is a good way to gauge co-curricular and academic interests.
- As you get to know the student, seek to link class work to the pupil's particular interests and strengths.
- If your class involves group work (which can be challenging for some individuals on the spectrum), one suggestion is to draw numbers or make groups beforehand.
- It is common for students on the spectrum to wish to be perceived as "neurotypical". There may be a great deal of stigma associated with the word "disability". This student may not wish to use accommodations or even associate with disabled services.

2. BE CLEAR, CONCRETE, AND SPECIFIC

Individuals on the spectrum may struggle with integration and executive functioning. This makes it difficult to organize work, thoughts, and use small details to create a big picture.

- Students on the spectrum may have problems with abstract and conceptual thinking. Provide step by step concrete directions if you think a student is lost or overwhelmed.
- Be aware that students on the spectrum may take sarcasm and/or figures of speech literally.
- Print out hard copies of important documents such as class schedules, weekly calendars, curriculum sheets, and flow charts
- Many students on the spectrum favor a certain method of learning. Try to communicate important information both verbally and by writing it down
- Use principles of Universal Design whenever possible. Communicate information and check for understanding in as many ways as possible. For more information visit the National Center on Universal Design: <http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udlguidelines>.
- Remember that most individuals with autism have difficulty reading facial expressions and interpreting "body language". Due to this, students on the spectrum may lack appropriate eye-contact and misinterpret social cues.

3. MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS

Students on the spectrum can be more sensitive to the environment than neurotypical students. Sensory overload may cause them to initiate anxiety-reducing behaviors also referred to as perseverations or “stims”.

- Note if anything in the environment may be potentially distracting. Visually check to see if the student seems unusually anxious.
- In general, your best bet is to minimize strong fragrances, and flashing or overly bright lights. Monitor the classroom temperature and sound levels as best you can.
- Once a professor has explained that a certain behavior is a disruption to the class and a plan has been put in place, the student is expected to adhere to this plan. When in doubt explain to the student that you need to involve the Disability Resource Center.
- Remember that some of the student's strange behaviors may serve an adaptive, anxiety-reducing purpose (Egs: hand-flapping, rocking, and humming). Seek to understand these behaviors not to fix them.
- If you've found that continually responding in a logical manner or arguing back seldom stops problem behavior, try requesting that a student write down their question or argumentative statement.
- Eye contact may be more difficult for someone on the spectrum. If the student struggles with eye contact, remain comfortable and continue talking. You may also try diverting their focus to something you can both look at. (Eg: Computer screen)

4. CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

- If a student appears to display rude or aggressive behavior, gently invite them to talk after class or attend Office Hours. Ask them if they're ok, and clearly communicate that you are trying to understand and support the student.
- Many students on the spectrum display extreme difficulty reading reactions of others. Try role-playing or scripting classroom situations to develop the student's awareness and empathy.
- Repetition is key: When giving directions/making a plan, encourage the student to write or type each step in the process. Ask the student to repeat aloud to check accuracy.
- If the student only responds with yes or no answers, try to ask open-ended questions, smile, and wait patiently for the student to respond.
- Do not ignore disruptive classroom behavior such as blurting out or excessive hand-raising. Encourage the student's enthusiasm but explain that there isn't time to answer every question during class due to time restrictions and other students. Try giving the student Question/Comment cards. The student can be given two Q/C cards that are taken away when they contribute to a discussion. Once they are out of cards the student can no longer comment or ask questions. You may also suggest that the student write down all questions and then set a time to review them after class.
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