Disability Knowledge Community

UNIVERSAL DESIGN AND STUDENTS WITH AUTISM:
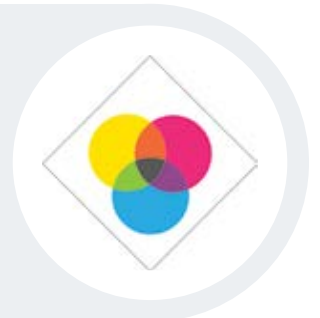## BEST PRACTICES THAT MAY BENEFIT ALL STUDENTS

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**Social Justice
and Inclusion**

With the increased number of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) in the general population, there has been a significant surge in the number of students with ASDs on our campuses (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015). With this increase comes the need for strategies that will help not only students with ASDs but all students who attend institutions of higher education. Implementing the Universal Design strategies discussed below may bring us closer to meeting social justice goals and inclusion of all students, regardless of their abilities.

Issues that are common to all student populations include increased anxiety, poor time-management skills, and improper social skills, as shown in Figure 1 below:
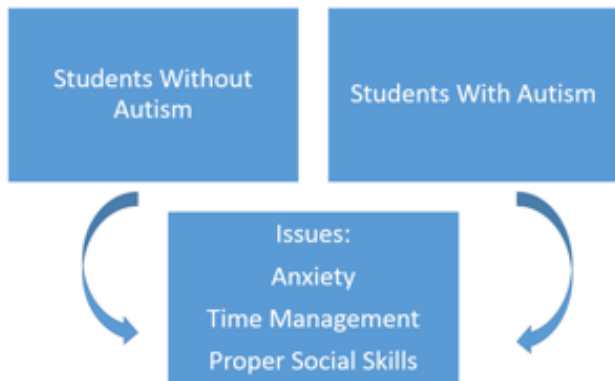
Figure 1. Issues faced by all populations of college students. This figure illustrates that many of the issues faced by students with ASDs are the same issues faced by all students: anxiety, time management, and proper social skills.

Universal Design is "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Center for Universal Design, 1997, para. 3). According to the Learning Opportunities Task Force (2003),

A core concept of Universal Design is that by anticipating and planning for the diverse needs of potential users during the design process, the resulting product or outcome will better suit the needs of all users… When applying the concept of Universal Design to instruction, the benefits are much the same. Anticipating and planning for the diverse needs of students, including but not limited to students with disabilities, results in a better learning experience for all students. (p. 1)

Because many strategies available to assist students with ASDs can benefit multiple populations, these strategies are in line with the concept of Universal Design. Examples of these strategies include calming methods such as counting to 10, deep breathing, mindfulness, exercise, and talking to a friend, counselor, or coach. Other strategies include receiving tips and training on organization, time management, proper social interaction, and social etiquette. The following are learning and development strategies that can be employed to assist students with ASDs and students who may or may not have documented disabilities but who struggle with issues such as anxiety, disorganization, poor time management, and un(der) developed social interaction skills.

Anxiety

Anxiety is an overwhelming issue for many students on the spectrum. We also know this is true for many college students with other diagnoses (Regehr, Glancy, & Pitts, 2013). Creating a meditation room, especially in each residence hall, can assist students on the spectrum with

sensory needs and provide all students an opportunity to de-stress. These rooms have Universal Design measures such as comfortable furniture (e.g., beanbag chairs), soft lighting and colors, and sometimes a small water feature. Additional strategies that can be used to decrease anxiety include teaching mindfulness techniques (Alfred, 2016) and other calming methods (visualization, use of stress balls and stress toys, relaxation exercises, etc.). Effectively utilizing these strategies may produce benefits such as a greater sense of community in residence halls, more positive experiences with student affairs personnel, better grades, and improved institutional attitude all the way through graduation. Positive interactions may also contribute to student retention.

Organization and Time Management

Organization and time management are, unquestionably, keys to success for all college students. Unfortunately, many students, with and without disabilities, come to college lacking these essential skills and need support in order to develop them.

Using a calendar is the most important organizational technique for college students. It is surprising how many incoming students still rely on their parents or others to keep track of appointments and do not use any type of calendar—electronic or paper—to manage their classes, lives, or meetings. Getting students started with Google calendar or another electronic calendar will help them to develop an organizational system that they can have with them at all times, on their phone or another device. This electronic means of tracking meetings, appointments, classes, and homework is also beneficial in that it allows for reminders to be set.

Some students prefer paper calendars, but these may be misplaced or lost. If using a paper calendar, schedule, or agenda, students should come up with strategies to keep track of this valuable aid. Whether it is an electronic or a paper calendar, putting classes, meetings, exercise, personal/family time, and study time all on the calendar is essential.

You can encourage this practice in your offices by booking appointments and showing students how your own calendar is organized and utilized. This type of modeling will assist the visual learners who need to see, as well as hear, an idea. For those who learn best by viewing or hearing step-by-step examples, there are captioned YouTube videos such as "How to Stay Organized in College: Planning From the Syllabus" (Hope, 2016).

A good time-management technique for your students is using the timer or alarm (audio or vibrating) on a phone or a watch. For some students, this feature can help manage their days; others need a more visual approach, such as the Time Timer application (app), which can be downloaded from the iTunes store. Most traditional-aged students have

grown up using digital clocks and have difficulty with or do not use analog clocks. Digital clocks, however, do not show the passage of time, and that is where Time Timer is helpful. This app, which can be downloaded to your student's phone or computer, shows the passage of time in red and shows how much time students have left. This app may also be a good tool for managing computer gaming or TV time, as the app can be placed in a small corner of the screen. This visual prompt can also help with time left for an exam, time to get to class, study time, etc. There are similar apps, but this is the one the authors recommend because it has been used successfully by many students.

Social Interaction

Another challenge for students with ASDs, and a part of the definition of autism, is issues with social interaction. Most people on the spectrum struggle with nonverbal communication. Because many college students are more adept at socializing through screen contact, working on socialization skills is good for all students. Ways to increase social interaction skills might include encouraging structured socialization time or having an area of campus set aside for no cell phone use. Residence halls can have screen-free evenings, when students interact with one another in person. This can be especially useful for students on the spectrum as well as students who are naturally shy, introverted, or otherwise socially awkward. Starting the evening with a structured activity—instead of just hanging out—can be a great equalizer. Try board game night or Lego night; one campus had success with ballroom dance and salsa night. Try an activity in which everyone learns something and with which most participants have little experience, allowing all students to be on a more equal level.

Personnel and Universal Design Strategies

The Universal Design strategies mentioned above should not end with providing the tools to students only. Students would also benefit if student affairs and residence hall personnel were aware of some of these strategies and able to assist students as they develop them further. For example, there are many challenges associated with living away from home for the first time— in particular, living among strangers and in close proximity to individuals from very different backgrounds. To assist students in becoming acclimated to the college environment, personnel who oversee residence halls and other student affairs areas may benefit from training on strategies that may have traditionally been associated as beneficial only to those with ASDs, such as the aforementioned calming methods, organization and time-management skills, and social skills. If student affairs and residence hall personnel are prepared to assist students in navigating the social interactions associated with college life, the incidence of conduct issues may decrease.

Overall, many of the universal design approaches that are good for students with ASDs are good for all students. This concept of Universal Design is helpful for academic, housing, and cocurricular experiences and will further the development and integration of college students no matter their age, experience, or academic or social level. Including those students who think or act differently is good for everyone—students, faculty, staff, and society as a whole, and is a positive step forward in terms of social justice and inclusion.

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