

Diversity Statement

Nearly 3% of students in higher education are affected by Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), of which, 40% complete their degree successfully and face employment rates as low as 4%. Universities are working hard to understand and meet the needs of these individuals, but more can be done to provide students and staff with the support they need to succeed. This can be done, in part, by developing opportunities to increase both community engagement and quality of life. My personal and professional experiences working with children and adolescents on the spectrum exemplifies how I approach working with nontraditional students, staff and faculty.

My awareness and sensitivity towards people with communication difficulties grows continually. Over the past two years, I have worked with speech therapists, occupational therapists and behavioral therapists to understand appropriate tactics for streamlining the development in young children with ASD. Recently, I have transitioned to working with older children and teens through community-level work organized by the Autism Tree Project Foundation (ATPF). In a workshop, titled "Ready, Set, Go!", high-school students were mentored on the college admissions process. Students were provided example applications and alumni interview reports, which were used to play the role of admission committee members in the decision making process. Activities like these help students provide scripts to learn how to effectively communicate their strengths on paper and during in-person or online interviews.

Conducting my graduate studies overseas gave me perspective on what it feels like to find oneself outside of the dominant culture and strained to communicate effectively. Those with ASD struggle with participation and social communication more so than students without executive function difficulties. Such difficulties put these students and staff at a disadvantage, since the ability to communicate research findings and collaborate with others is crucial to academic success. Fortunately, many "mainstream" behaviors can be taught by practicing social scenarios that people with ASD do not grasp intuitively. In an ATPF-hosted event, titled "Lego Therapy," I worked closely with children/adolescents and their families to teach effective participation skills. In small groups, individuals take on different roles in the Lego-building process: communicator, engineer, and quality analyst. This activity promotes teamwork and participation skills.

While much of my experience has come from working with children and teens, the core principles that I have learned translate to the university level. For example, difficulties with social interaction, communication, sensory processing, fine-motor skills, and intolerance to changing routines affect university life. In courses, I provide digital and printed PDFs of lectures to promote better focus. I promote accessibility in my presentations by using inclusive language, minimizing distractions, and predefining group membership. Implementation of future integration programs will include: 1) Form mentoring alliances for students, staff and faculty not on the spectrum to promote better ASD awareness; (2) Organize executive function training for students/staff with ASD; (3) Generate resources to help students (e.g., finding roommates, social circles, and student/faculty mentors).

In summary, promoting a better understanding and appreciation of differences among students and staff will reduce stigmatization and discrimination on campus. A small effort can go a long way in helping students with ASD reach their full potential.