Academic Support Strategies for Postsecondary Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

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The following strategies can assist academic personnel in successful work with students with ASD and other learning differences. It is important to note that while many ASD students have similar characteristics, no two students are alike and it is important to treat each student as individuals with unique personality traits, strengths, preferences, and challenges.

- Use fewer words when explaining assignments. Don’t assume a highly verbal student has highly receptive language skills.

- Break down larger tasks and assignments into smaller, more manageable chunks of information.

- Sarcasm, innuendos, and double meanings may be confusing. Be sure to check for understanding and provide clarification as needed.

- Provide a clear syllabus with dates for all exams, assignments, etc.

- If and when changes occur (syllabus, due dates, etc.), alert the student as quickly as possible, and in writing. ASD students prefer routine —many crave it—and any changes or modifications in routine or scheduling without adequate notification can lead to a great deal of stress or anxiety.

- Carve out time at the beginning of the quarter or semester to meet with the student. Getting to know your student is one of the best strategies for providing support that matches his or her needs.

- Regularly “check in” with students to ensure his or her needs are being met. Just because an ASD student doesn’t express a need for help doesn’t mean they don’t want or need it. They often need support in advocating/communicating his or her needs to professors, TAs, roommates, etc.

- Don’t assume ASD students are just being “rude”. Many struggle in the area of Theory of Mind (ToM). ToM is the capacity to consider or form opinions about the cognitive states of others. Challenges in this area can result in ASD students appearing rude, uninterested, or self-absorbed.

- Don’t assume he or she is “just being lazy.” Among ASD students, executive functioning (EF) is a common challenge. EF skills include working memory, prioritization, organization, time management, task initiation, metacognition, sustained attention, goal-directed persistence, and flexibility. These challenges can add to an already stressful college experience.
