

Facing the Challenges of Post-Secondary Education: Strategies for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)



Jason Manett & Kevin P. Stoddart, October 2012

Students with ASD can find their time in post-secondary education both rewarding and challenging. Challenges in post-secondary education are generally more pronounced for students with ASD because of the differences between high school and colleges/universities academically, bureaucratically and in terms of lifestyle and supports required.

Post-secondary students with ASD are expected to 'take the lead' when it comes to their education and family members are encouraged to be less involved than they may have been in previous years. By law and by the institution they are considered adults, therefore the student's written permission is needed before college or university personnel can communicate directly with a parent. Students are responsible for knowing due dates for assignments and test dates, completing assigned work, evaluating whether they need help or support, and arranging for it. Although they may be available for individualized student support, busy professors and instructors may not initiate communication about supports with students, even if they are not performing well.

To receive academic accommodations and support, arrangements need to be made in advance at post-secondary institutions. This includes registering with the Disability Office*, making appointments with Disability Counsellors, academic support staff, psychological support staff, and Registrars, and registering to write tests and exams with accommodations. Supports are often decentralized, which means that students usually have to go to many different offices or locations to get the help that they require on campus.

Challenges in Post-Secondary Education

Challenges maintaining new daily routines:

Transitioning to post-secondary means many changes. For some students it means living away from home or moving to a new town or city. Depending on

students' living situation, they may have new responsibilities such as managing money, arranging transportation, preparing meals, and completing household tasks such as cleaning and doing laundry. For almost all students, attending post-secondary means major changes in routine including how the school day and week are organized in terms of the class schedule and when to complete homework and other tasks. There is less structure than in high school, and more of a need for planning and taking initiative.

Academic Challenges:

Sometimes, what is interesting or important to individuals with ASD is different from what is interesting or important to others. As a result, many students with ASD have difficulty interpreting assignment expectations. What a professor or instructor expects for topic selection, how much detail to include for specific sections, and which information is more important, may require support from academic tutors.

Behavioral and communication challenges:

There are many 'unwritten rules' of classroom conduct. Sometimes students with ASD struggle to know what this appropriate behaviour is. Examples of errors in classroom conduct include asking too many questions, answering rhetorical questions (questions that are not meant to be answered), answering with too much detail, going 'off-topic' and speaking too much or too little in tutorials. Group work can also be a challenge. Some students with ASD struggle with turn-taking, dividing tasks, and integrating components of work. Labs are complex settings that require processing instructions relating to novel tasks, transitioning between stations, performing fine motor tasks, and coordinating with other students--often within tight time constraints. This can be challenging for students with ASD because of social, communication, sensory and information-processing differences. Post-secondary students with ASD often have difficulty writing to and speaking with professors and instructors, administrative staff, and Disability Office staff. In particular, identifying a need for help and explaining what help is needed may be challenging.

Social Challenges:

Students with ASD often have unique and intense interests that are different from their peers. In addition, the communication style of these students is often different. These students frequently enter post-secondary with less experience with friendships and romantic relationships as well as lower levels of participation

in social activities. As a result, interacting with other students can be challenging since the postsecondary experience is associated with expectations of high levels of social engagement and sexuality.

Organizational and Decision-Making Challenges:

Many students with ASD have difficulty deciding about course load, program choice, whether to continue in or drop a course in cases when grades are low, whether to ask for help, what to ask for and when to ask. This relates to challenges imagining possible outcomes, general difficulties with interpersonal communication, anxiety, and the pressure to make decisions in a timely manner.

Strategies for Success in Post-secondary Education

Take part in transitional programs, mentorship, and a social group: Transitional programs for the general student body as well as those geared toward students with disabilities are valuable. They provide opportunities to meet other students, meet specific support staff and learn about their role, develop institutional awareness (i.e. procedures, what different offices and personnel do, and where things are). They also provide a chance to learn more about differences between high school and postsecondary studies, academic expectations and potential accommodations that are available. Transition programs also help students to anticipate potential problems and how to address them, connect with social supports, such as groups and mentorship programs, and help to realistically evaluate readiness for post-secondary.

ASD-specific social groups are available at some postsecondary institutions. These allow students with similar interests, communication styles and, often, similar backgrounds and challenges, to connect with one another. These similarities are the basis of friendships and offer an opportunity for informal support, information sharing, and strategizing to occur.

Mentorship programs for the general student body are common within post-secondary institutions. Some colleges and universities also have specific mentorship programs for students entering their first year of study and who registered with the Disability Office. The goal of the program is to help integrate students into the university/college community, help them navigate the services at the school and use the services offered by the Disability Office effectively. Mentors are generally upper year students trained by the Disability Office who show leadership skills and sensitivity to issues related to disabilities. Effective mentorship programs include the opportunity for weekly one-on-one meetings as well as extra group events throughout the year.

Register with the Disability Office to arrange supports in advance and maintain regular contact:

Every college and university in Ontario has a Disability Office, which is staffed by Disability Counsellors, Learning Strategists and Adaptive Technologists, and is responsible for providing academic accommodations for students with documented disabilities. The Disability Office arranges test and exam accommodations, notetaking services, and provides referrals to academic support services (i.e. learning strategists). Depending on the needs of the student and the documentation provided, the Disability Office can help by communicating with professors about extensions for assignments, having rules or expectations for labs, classes and tutorials clarified, and helping with problems as they arise. Based on the documentation provided and the meeting between the student and Disability Counsellor, they may be able to make requests for funding for tutoring, coaching, counselling, and adaptive hardware (i.e. computers) and software.

Applying for a loan through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) is recommended as eligibility for the Bursary for Students with Disabilities (BSWD) is contingent on OSAP-eligibility. Depending on the institution, other opportunities for funding for disability-related supports and equipment may be available.

It is best to make an initial appointment with the Disability Office at least 1-2 months before the beginning of the academic term whenever possible so that services and supports can be arranged in advance. Researching the institution's Disability Office's website to learn about the specific supports and services offered as well as the requirements for documentation of a disability is also recommended.

Arrange support for academic and institutional communication:

Because of challenges with communication and perspective-taking, students with ASD can benefit from help with institutional communication or communicating with financial offices, faculties, Registrar's offices and other departments on campus. This includes reviewing drafts of emails before they are sent, speaking with someone about the information being sought or the difficulty being experienced to plan or confirm wording for emails, telephone calls and in-person conversations. Parents, other students, Disability Office staff, writing centers and learning strategists are possible sources of support in this area. As a result of the nature of the academic requirements that students with ASD often face, many need help with academic communication. Some suggestions include:

- Plan assignments with the help of learning strategists and tutors to make sure the student is interpreting the expectations correctly and has a good

plan

- Bring drafts of assignments to learning strategists, tutors and writing centers
- Review marked assignments with learning strategists, tutors, and professors or their teaching assistants (TA) to get feedback for improvement

Arrange a manageable course load:

Some students are able to manage a full course load. However, it is common for individuals with ASD to take longer to complete academic tasks because of the academic difficulties, specifically interpretation issues that they face. Taking a manageable course load provides students with more time to adjust to post-secondary studies, access any supports that are required, engage in social activities and meet academic demands. Most programs can arrange for students to complete their studies on a part-time basis, particularly if arrangements are made in advance.

*Each post-secondary institution will have its own name for Disability Office. Some examples include: Disabilities Office; Disability Services Office; or Accessible Learning Centre.

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