

University of Wisconsin- Whitewater
Whitewater, Wisconsin
Graduate School

Students on the Autism Spectrum and the Transitional Skills Necessary for College

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements of the
Master of Science in Education – Professional Development

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July 27, 2013

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the staff at the Center for Students with Disabilities for helping me jumpstart this project. I also want to thank Dr. Hohenshell, and Dr. Clinkenbeard, for their helpful feedback and guidance. Lastly, I would like to thank my family for all of their support and encouragement throughout the years.

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Abstract

This study examined the transitional life skills students with Autism and Asperger's need in order to succeed in college. Students with Autism and Asperger's can do well in college if they possess specific life skills. This information learned from researching literature led to the development of a handbook. The handbook contains specific life skills needed to succeed in college. It provides definitions of successful college students from different Disability Service Coordinators. Disability Service Coordinators from four different higher education institutions in Wisconsin were interviewed about what life skills they felt students with Autism and Asperger's needed to possess for college. Current college students on the Autism Spectrum were also interviewed for creation of the handbook. A main theme that emerged from the interviews was that self-advocacy is key for these students to do well in college. A second theme that emerged was that universities need to provide more accommodations to assist students on the Spectrum while they are in college.

Chapter 1

Introduction

I grew up with a twin brother who has Asperger's. Growing up with him and seeing the challenges he faced inspired me to pick this topic. Another great inspiration from my life was having worked at the Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD). I was given the wonderful opportunity to work with college students on the Autism Spectrum. I took particular interest in working with these students partly because of my brother and also because I felt I had a special connection with these students. I felt I could understand them better than most of my peers.

I created a nine page handbook for CSD about the important life skills students with Autism and Asperger's needed in order to be successful in college. I felt that having a handbook that could be easily accessed and read would be a great asset to CSD, and for incoming freshmen. I also felt it was important for CSD to have this handbook because there currently are no handbooks created by CSD for students with Autism and Asperger's, or for any student with a disability. Students on the Spectrum who are already in college could find this handbook useful, as they may come across some transition issues in their second, third, or fourth years of college. I feel that everyone transitions at a different pace, and some students may encounter transitional issues at different times in their lives.

First, I wanted to define Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). According to Merriam Webster ASD is "any of a group of developmental disorders (as autism and Asperger's syndrome) marked by impairments in the ability to communicate and interact socially and by the presence of repetitive behaviors or restricted interests" (Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2013). It is known that students with Autism and Asperger's attend college at a lower rate than students without this disability. However, the exact number of college students with Autism and

Asperger's is unknown. Students are responsible for disclosing their disability to the university and as such, their representation may be under-reported. To date, there is insufficient information concerning the enrollment of autistic students in higher education. While some students on the spectrum may have cognitive difficulties that are by no means true for all and many definitely have the cognitive tools for college.

More in depth information regarding Autism and Asperger's and its relevance to students in higher education is discussed in this paragraph. Hart, Grigal and Weir (2010) reported an interesting statistic, "As of 2007, 15,443 students between the ages of 18 and 21 years were identified as having Autism" (p. 135). The number of students with Autism in college most likely has increased since the 2007 statistic. "Autism was first identified in 1943, by Dr. Leo Kanner, a child psychiatrist at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore (Smith, 2007, p. 1). Autism also can be identified as High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (HFASD). According to (White, Ollendick, & Bray, 2011, p. 2) "Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), in the absence of intellectual disability, have been described as possessing high-functioning autism spectrum disorder." People with high functioning autism spectrum disorder usually have high verbal skills and excel in specific areas or interests. Another definition is provided by (Adreon & Durocher, 2007, p. 272). "The term autism spectrum disorder refers to a group of neurodevelopmental disorders that affect development in the areas of social interaction, communication, and behavior." Since this disorder is on a spectrum it affects everyone who has it in a different way and the symptoms can range from mild to severe. Another aspect of Autism is that individuals may have difficulties with change in routines, and be sensitive to smells or noises. To put Autism in clearer terms Sinclair (1993) offered this comment about Autism:

Autism isn't something a person has, or a "shell" that a person is trapped inside. There is no normal child hidden behind autism. Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive. It is not possible to separate the autism from the person-and if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with (p. 3).

Another disorder on the Autism Spectrum is Asperger's. Asperger's is relatively new to the U.S. and was not identified until 1981. It was first identified by Hans Asperger in 1944 (Dillon, 2007, p. 1) The American Psychiatric Association did not include Asperger's in the Diagnostic Statistics Manual until 1994. Dillon, (2007) found that Asperger's is a mild form of Autism and has disabilities in communication, socialization and emotions/behaviors. Socialization can be difficult for individuals with Asperger's. "People with Asperger's tend to struggle with social interactions because of their extreme literal-mindedness, they typically are unable to infer meanings from tone or context" (Farrell, 2004, p. 1). For example, a student with Asperger's would not understand sarcasm and would take what the person said literally, this can cause them to be ridiculed by peers. Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome usually have a particular interest or are extremely good at a certain activity, like programming computers, or remembering historic events in great detail. Despite the communication and social difficulties, individuals with Asperger's are usually very intelligent and "often display average to above average cognitive abilities and structural language strengths" (Hadley, Morrison, & Sansosti, 2009, p.1). Students with Autism and Asperger's need to understand their strengths so they can determine a college major and understand their weaknesses so they can advocate for the help they need.

There also appears to be a lack of research regarding students with Autism and Asperger's and their transition to college. While the number of people diagnosed with Autism

has increased, "there is limited research on the transition" of these students into college (Hart, Grigal & Weir, 2009, p.135). Steps need to be taken to assist students with Autism and Asperger's in their transition to college. Students with Autism and Asperger's face specific challenges that can make college life difficult. There are common living issues that may be difficult for individuals with ASD. These include, hygiene, like showering daily, waking up for class, dressing appropriately, acquiring help from professors, and getting familiar with how to use their campus ID.

Communicating with others and handling emotions also can be a challenge for students with Autism and Asperger's. According to Morrison, Sansosti, and Hadley (2009),

Individuals with AS [Asperger's Syndrome] often have difficulty recognizing and expressing emotions responding to distracting sensory stimuli within the environment and engaging in a host of executive function tasks such as setting goals; initiating planning; and monitoring performance (p. 1).

Due to these challenges it appears crucial for students with Autism and Asperger's to be educated on what essential life skills they will need to thrive in college.

The handbook was created with information derived from phone interviews from four disability service coordinators from four different higher education institutions who work with students with Autism and Asperger's. These professionals were from a private liberal arts college, a technical college, a two year college, and a four year college in the mid-western United States. I developed interview questions for the coordinators in September 2012 and conducted the phone interviews in the beginning of October 2012. I obtained the three disability coordinators' from three different higher education institutions contact information (email, and

phone number) from Director of Whitewater's CSD, Dr. Elizabeth Watson. The fourth disability service coordinator worked at the university I was conducting my research from. I initiated contact with the disability service coordinator through email explaining my capstone project and requesting a phone interview with each disability service coordinator, as well as a confidentiality statement to sign. I conducted the phone interviews with my cell phone in the CSD conference room for privacy.

During the phone interviews, I took field notes in a notebook and I sent a summary to the disability service coordinators via email to ensure I accurately captured what they said. I asked them what life skills they felt students with Autism and Asperger's need in order to be successful. Another question I asked is what skills they have seen their students with Autism and Asperger's possess that enabled them to excel in higher education. I also asked them what their definition is of a "successful" college student, and what high impact practices their students participate in under these categories: student organizations, friendships, employment, and leadership.

In addition, I conducted interviews with four students from UW-Whitewater who have Autism or Asperger's. The interviewees were two male students; one junior, one senior, and two females; one sophomore, and one who graduated. I created the interview questions for the students in September 2012. I received the students' email addresses from Karen Fisher, Disability Services Coordinator at CSD. I emailed all four of them explaining my project and included a consent form for them to sign. For the three current college students I asked them to each meet separately with me and conduct the face-to-face interview in the CSD conference room. For the female student who graduated I conducted the phone interview with my cell phone in the CSD conference room while I took field notes. Before the interview, I did send her

a consent form that she returned to me via email. Additionally, I sent her a summary to ensure I accurately wrote down what she said. During the three male students' face-to-face interviews I recorded the interview on a digital recorder, and wrote down a few notes. I was then able to listen to the interview afterwards and compared it with my notes.

I asked the students what life skills they felt students on the spectrum needed in order to thrive in higher education. I narrowed down the question by asking the students what life skills were needed academically, emotionally, socially, and financially. Another question I asked them is what life skills they had to learn before they started college, and what life skills they used that helped them be successful in college. I also asked them what their definition was of a "successful" college student, and what high impact practices they partook in such as student organizations, friendships, employment, and leadership.

To evaluate this handbook, I asked the eight disability service coordinators and the director from CSD at UWW to evaluate the handbook by survey with an area for comments and suggestions. I asked the CSD staff to evaluate my handbook with the survey I created and send via email by April 2013. The feedback was used to improve the handbook. It was personally satisfying that CSD had a document on hand that I made that would assist students with Autism and Asperger's in their transition to college. My hope is that the handbook will be used for many years to come.

This project enhanced my professional voice by contributing information that had the potential to facilitate the transition for incoming freshmen with Autism and Asperger's. This also allowed me to demonstrate my knowledge of Autism and Asperger's. I did not want any student to give up on pursuing a college degree, despite facing the challenges of having Autism

and Asperger's. In the future more higher education institutions may provide more services and accommodations for students with Autism and Asperger's. With the right resources and assistance, students on the spectrum can thrive in a higher education setting.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This literature review discusses the history of legislation in regards to students with disabilities, as well as Autism and Asperger's. It also explains how these students learn life-skills, the challenges they face, the support services offered and needed at the university level, and what university administration, faculty and students can do to support students with Autism and Asperger's in college.

Legislation

Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act 1973

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html>

Four key pieces of legislation created in the U.S. addresses students with disabilities. First, Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act applies to students with disabilities in college specifically. The Center for Students with Disabilities website explains disability documentation policies, which includes the Americans and Disability Act (ADA) and Section 504. "In accordance with the Americans and Disability Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, individuals with disabilities are protected from discrimination and assured services and accommodations that provide equal access to the activities and programs of the university" (Center for Students with Disabilities, 2012, para. 25). In order to be eligible for accommodations a student must have a disability that severely limits a prominent life activity, for example, like having muscular dystrophy and not being able to get around by walking. Documentation providing the disability must be current, and provided by a "licensed clinical professional familiar with the history and functional implications of the

impairments” (Center for Students with Disabilities, 2012, para. 26). Section 504 discusses what a “qualified” student is, who can be eligible for receiving modifications and accommodations. According to the Office for Civil Rights, “At the postsecondary level, a qualified student with a disability is a student with a disability who meets the academic and technical standards requisite for admission or participation in the institution’s educational program or activity (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p 4).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 1990

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/individuals-disabilities-education-act/>

Second, students with disabilities in K-12 follow the guidelines for accommodations through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 1990. This act states that all children with disabilities have the right to a free and appropriate education as well as education in regular education classrooms. Children with disabilities education should be planned and observed with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). To keep current with special education IDEA was reauthorized in 1997 and 2004.

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)

<http://www.ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm>

Third, another important piece of legislation is the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). The purpose of this act is to protect individuals with disabilities from being discriminated against in the areas of employment, public accommodations, and transportation. The Department of Labor, as well as the following offices helps enforce the ADA; the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the Department of Transportation, the Federal

Communications Commission (FCC), and the Department of Justice. The ADA also applies to higher education. It “applies to every public and private institution except those affiliated with religious organizations” (College Parents of America, 2011, p 1). The Americans with Disabilities Act notes what accommodations and modifications universities have to provide, and what they do not have to provide. For example, “the college or institution may be required to remove any barriers impeding the student-whether these are architectural communication related or transportation-or to provide reasonable modifications to rules, policies, or practices” (College Parents of America, 2011, p. 1). Universities are not required to meet any personal needs of a student, like providing glasses or contacts. However, if students wish to have accommodations or modifications they must self-disclose that they have a disability. Students must initiate contact with the school’s disabilities office to disclose their disability and must approach professors to indicate the accommodations that they will need to be successful” (Adreon & Durocher, 2007, p. 276). No professor or parent can have access to a student’s disability records without consent from the student. This is required under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) 1974.

Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2008 (HEOA)

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/highered/leg/hea08/index.html>

The fourth piece of disability legislation that will be discussed is the Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2008 (HEOA). This act was passed on August 14, 2008. HEOA reauthorizes the Higher Education Act of 1965. This act was passed to assist in helping college students with the cost of college. It specifically helps students with intellectual disabilities for example, “to grant ceilings, need analysis and satisfactory progress in order to make students

with cognitive disabilities eligible for Pell Grants, Federal Work-Study (FWS), and Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (SEOG) funds” (American Council on Education, 2008, p. 4). The act explains the definition of an intellectual disability which is “a cognitive impairment, characterized by significant limitations in intellectual and cognitive functioning, and adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills” (Kearns, Kleinert, Harrison, Sheppard-Jones, Hall, M., & Jones, 2010, p. 10). The other important detail of the definition is that the student has to be currently or previously eligible for public education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990). It is important to note that a student must be enrolled in a two or four year college or a technical school in order to be considered for the grants or work-study. All of the legislation discussed has helped students with disabilities have the opportunity to pursue a higher degree.

Challenges and needed skills

Students on the Autism Spectrum often face specific challenges while they are in college. Also, there are many specific life skills that students with disabilities should understand before entering college. One life skill that is particularly important for students with disabilities is understanding the disability they have. If an individual does not understand their disability they may not be able to advocate for accommodations and modifications. According to Thoma and Getzel (2005) “learning about oneself, and particularly about one’s disability are directly related to the self-determination core component skills of self-knowledge and self understanding.” (p. 237) Many times students search the internet to learn about their disability, joining support groups online also is a popular option for students. Support groups are popular because then students can relate to others about their struggles and offer support and suggestions. Students need a well developed understanding of their disability and the academic methods that work best

for them. Rusch, Hughes, Agran, Martin and Johnson (2009), suggests that “high schools should guarantee that all students have identified a desired post-high school placement and that high school personnel assist these students in making the transition from high school to postsecondary institutions” (p. 53).

There are various challenges students with Autism and Asperger’s face in transitioning to college. Alverson, Naranjo, Yamamoto, and Unruh, (2010) reported that young adults attend postsecondary education at lower rates than their peers without disabilities. This is most likely due to the lack of transition planning for these students. Also, a number of other challenges exist at the postsecondary level for students with Autism and Asperger’s. Adreon and Durocher (2007) stated that Asperger’s and Autism can be considered a hidden disability due to the fact that one cannot tell someone has Asperger’s and Autism just by looking at them. Also, students hesitation to share that they have Autism or Asperger’s to disability personnel in college, as well as larger class sizes, and very limited one on one time with professors can make college difficult.

Another challenge students with Autism and Asperger’s may face in college is their day-to-day routine. “For many individuals with ASD, time, routines, and schedules, are the backbone of each day. This may be problematic in postsecondary education as schedules which appear to be set frequently change” (Roberts, 2010, p. 161). If an instructor cancels class one day a student with ASD may struggle deciding what to do with their unexpected free time. Instead of working on homework, the student may decide to watch television. Students with Autism and Asperger’s need to learn how to deal with a schedule that isn’t set in stone everyday. The stress of starting college can increase these symptoms in students with Autism and Asperger’s. Students with Autism and Asperger’s “may need a little longer to process information and organize responses” (Williams, & Palmer, 2010, p. 2). Students with Autism and Asperger’s

need to keep the above challenges in mind when they are planning on going to college, so they can try and strategize how to overcome them in order to succeed in college.

Self-advocacy is another key life-skill that should be understood ideally before a student goes to college. A definition of self-advocacy provided in the research literature comes from (Roberts, 2010, p 160), “Self-advocacy is the ability to understand one’s own needs and effectively communicate those needs to others. A student’s ability to advocate for themselves is very important at the college level” Hadley (2011), stated when students transition to higher education:

Students are expected to contact the Office for Students with Disabilities, self-identify as a student with a disability, provide documentation of their disability and the accommodations needed, self-advocate to their instructors, and participate in services that will support their academic progress. (p.77).

Self-advocating for oneself helps a student to gain a more independent role in their lives. It is often forgotten or not realized that students have to self-advocate for themselves. Universities require students to sign information of release forms to be able to talk to parents regarding their children’s personal information. The release of information is required by the Family and Educational Rights Act of 1974 (FERPA). FERPA states that parents cannot receive information about their child, unless the student signs a consent form. If this form is not signed by the student the university cannot talk to the parent or guardian.

While individual self-advocacy of one’s disability is important at the college level, it is also important for a student with a disability to have a disability coordinator serve as an additional advocate for the student who has a disability to professors and other college faculty. Morrison,

Sansosti, and Hadley (2009), indicated that the disability coordinator can assist the student in any problems or conflicts that may come up between the student and professor regarding the student's disability or the accommodations they requested for the class. More importantly the coordinator can assist in teaching or reinforcing self-advocacy skills. The more support a student with disability has in a university setting, the more likely they are to thrive and excel.

Problem-solving is another important life skill students with disabilities should master preferably before entering college. Problem solving is working through details of a problem or issue and finding a solution. Some examples of problem solving skills are, completing math equations, crosswords, devising a plan to get a better grade in a class, or resolving a conflict with a roommate. Thoma and Getzel (2005) interviewed college students with different disabilities. The students identified problem-solving as an important skill to have. "For instance, one student talked about the fact that barriers find students, so students have to find out a lot of things on their own." (p.237). Figuring out what works for oneself was also mentioned. Knowing one's limitations, setting priorities and focusing on them was another aspect of problem-solving that was considered important by students. Similar ideas were also discussed by Getzel and Thoma, (2008). Individuals discussed that having time to organize and think about how to solve an issue was important.

Self-management also is considered an important life skill for students in college to possess. Self-management is skills or strategies one uses to direct their activities towards the achievement of something. An example of self-management in college is completing homework on time. Students interviewed by Thoma and Getzel, (2005) stated that learning to organize their time, using a planner, not having classes back-to-back, and setting specific time to study helped them do well in college. For example, "Organization of class materials and books to assist

in studying and keeping up with all aspects of class, including class notes, handouts, assignments, quizzes, and so on” (p 80). College students can end up having a lot of down time depending on how they schedule their classes. Students with disabilities in high school usually have a very structured class schedule since special education classes meet at certain times. The flexibility of time in college may be hard to manage at first for these students. That is why the techniques mentioned above will assist these students in maximizing their time effectively.

Goal-setting is the next life skill that will be discussed. Goals are important for anyone to have, especially in college when one is trying to figure out their major and minor. Goal-setting is the process of deciding what you want to accomplish and devising a plan to achieve that goal. An example of a goal in college is getting a 3.0 Grade Point Average (GPA) for the semester. Students interviewed by Thoma and Getzel (2005) discussed the importance of goal-setting. “It is important to set career goals that reflect what you want to do and enjoy in life” (p. 238). If someone sets a goal a career goal in a field they are not very interested in, they are very likely to give up on that goal. Another student suggested that a person should involve steps and accomplish one step at a time. Doing this makes the goal seem easier to attain and more manageable. Participants in Getzel and Thoma’s (2008) study recognized the importance of setting, realistic, short-term goals that “build to their long-term goals of careers, graduate school and living on their own” (p. 81).

Self-determination is a crucial life skill to have for any student who is going to go to college. An individual most likely will not be successful in life if they do not possess self-determination, regardless of whether they have a disability or not. For students with disabilities however, often times they may be lacking this important skill. Varieties of definitions have been found for self-determination in different journal articles. Yet, all of them share an underlying

meaning. Self-determination has been shown to be crucial for transitioning to college for students with disabilities. Many researchers have stressed the importance of self-determination and provide various definitions of it. Getzel and Thoma, (2008) provided an alternative definition of self-determination, which is, “being able to advocate for what you need, understanding your disability and how it impacts your learning, having self-confidence, being independent, and adjusting your schedule to make sure things get done.” (pp. 79-80). Self-determination is comprised of many different components, that all are important to assisting individuals in transitions throughout college and life.

Researchers have described the important pieces of self-determination. These important pieces include making goals, planning how to accomplish goals, and reflecting on whether the goal was achieved or not. As one can see goal-setting is a key component to self-determination. According to Field and Hoffman, (1999):

Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated behavior. An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults in society (p.36).

A more specific definition of self-determination from Wehmeyer (2001), states that self-determined people “are casual agents in their lives; they act to make positive things happen and to achieve personally valued goals instead of being acted upon.” (p. 42). The ability to evaluate one’s own strengths and weaknesses is also an important aspect of self-determination. Field and

Hoffman, (1999) explain that when a person evaluates their strengths and weaknesses they grow positively, which is essential to self-determination.

In Self-Determination Theory there are different types of motivation based on the different reasons or goals that give rise to action. The two different motivations are intrinsic and extrinsic. “The most basic distinction is between intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome.” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 55) Student with Autism and Asperger’s may have trouble identifying what influences their motivation. It is important to help students with Autism and Asperger’s identify what motivates them to help them go through life successfully and so they can make informed decisions on their own.

Social-skills are a set of skills people use to communicate with others. Making eye contact and shaking hands are examples of social-skills. According to Alwell and Cobb (2009), “social skills are behaviors that may be taught, learned, and performed.” (p. 95). A part of social skills includes social competence. Social competence is when individuals are able to change their behavior to match social norms in various settings, and contexts. Social skills are needed to be comfortable talking to a wide variety of people that one will meet while in college, which include classmates, professors, and other university staff.

Communication-skills are the last life-skill discussed. Communication skills are the activity of conveying information through the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, through speech, visuals, signals, writing, or even behavior. Alwell and Cobb (2009) provide an explanation of communication skills as, “communication requires at least two people, a sender of

a message and a receiver” (p. 95). The authors stress that communication skills are essential for students with disabilities because it is central to other activities in one’s life. (Conley, 2003), also discusses communication skills. He explains essential skills college students need such as, “the ability to express one’s self in writing and orally in a clear and convincing fashion” (p. 8). Communication does not just include talking to someone, being able to write clearly is also important because college students usually have to write a considerable amount of papers in their classes. All of the life skills that were explained are important to have a successful college career.

Individual support vs. Institutional support

There are many different ways students with Autism and Asperger’s learn life skills. Life skills can be learned independently by the individual or by support from others such as staff and peers. One way students on the Autism Spectrum learn is by trial and error. Getzel and Thoma, (2008) reported that students learned through trial and error about their disability. This could be for example, learning that it is important to do homework and study for exams in order to pass a class. It also could be attempting a semester of classes without accommodations to see how they do by themselves. In this way they could pinpoint exactly what areas they need help in. They also stated that trial and error “was especially true when learning how to learn and retain information” (p. 80). Some students in Getzel and Thoma’s article discussed the need to figure out their professors’s learning style before taking the class. Not all professors learning styles will work for everyone. It is important for students with Autism and Asperger’s to try and learn new ideas or concepts, even if they fail at them the first time, they should keep trying. This is a key learning tool for these students to find out what works and what may not work for them regarding studying and learning.

Peers and mentors can be a great support system for students with Autism and Asperger's. Getzel and Thoma (2008) found that the students they interviewed discussed how peers and mentors helped them in college. "Establishing friendships with peers, seeking out service support staff members on campus, and joining support groups or other group activities" (p. 81). were just some examples of support systems that students formed to assist them. Adreon and Durocher (2007) suggest "establishing a liaison or point person to go to when confused or stressed is helpful" (p. 277) The authors also discuss that having peers to help students with Autism and Asperger's understand lectures, and guide them through social situations was very helpful. Peers can also give suggestions on how to stay organized and keep up with assignments, which can be a difficult aspect to manage for students with Autism and Asperger's.

Parents can be a helpful resource for students with Autism and Asperger's. Since parents of students with Autism and Asperger's usually play a more active role in their college student's life it is natural for parents to be an additional support system. Thoma and Getzel (2005) had students discuss their parents helping them learn life skills. Other students discussed how they learned from their mother or father. Morningstar, et al., (2010) reported that "research has indicated that when families are highly involved and advocate for the needs of their child during high school, those students with disabilities demonstrate better self-advocacy skills in postsecondary education settings" (p. 82) Parents are a good resource for students with Autism and Asperger's especially if they are having trouble acquiring peer support. However, it is important for parents to not do everything for their student with Autism and Asperger's because then they may not learn things on their own and it will only hinder them later on in life.

Despite the challenges that students with Autism and Asperger's have to face there are a variety of support services offered at universities. Students with ASD can request a single room

when they are living in the dorms. “For many students with ASD, sharing a dorm room is extremely difficult. In most instances, a single room should be considered to avoid the sensory and social demands of sharing a small living space with others” (Adreon & Durocher 2007, p. 275). Other support services available at universities include “note takers, tape recorded lectures, being able to use a laptop computer in class to take notes, textbooks on tape, Kurzweil- which is a computer program that reads text aloud to students, priority seating, early registration for classes, private testing room, breaks between tests, time and a half or double time on exams, reader or scribe for exams, and being able to type up essay responses on the computer” (Hart, Grigal, & Weir, 2010, p. 134). Accommodations available for students with Autism and Asperger’s are “not assessing penalties for spelling errors on papers or exams, allowing substitutions for certain required or prerequisite courses, allowing a reduced course load, and providing assignments in smaller sections” (Roberts, 2010, p. 160). All these support services can assist students with Autism and Asperger’s in doing well in college.

There are many ways university staff, faculty, and students can assist students with Autism and Asperger’s at college to help them thrive. One way university administration can assist students with Autism and Asperger’s is by “including a self-advocacy component that could be integrated into summer transition programs or during orientation programs for students” (Hitchings, Luzzo, Ristow, & Horvath, 2001, p. 15). Another way students with Autism and Asperger’s can be supported is by disability services coordinators meeting with these students “to identify their goals and help the student articulate their dreams for the future” (Weir, 2004, p. 71). By helping these students identify their goals this helps them in focusing on specific tasks. Robertson & Ne’eman (2008) discussed specific supports universities can provide for students with Autism and Asperger’s. They suggested that training programs for Resident

Assistants (RA's) be created so that RA's can be trained on how to help students with Autism and Asperger's in the dorms, and educate them about the specific challenges these students face living in the residence halls. Another idea presented by Robertson & Ne'eman, (2008) was that student community service organizations could "participate in strengthening support for autistic students. They can create instructional programs for teaching strategies and approaches appropriate to autistic college students navigating the campus social environment, learning study skills, and managing daily living on the college campus" (p. 6).

A unique and not very well known support is discussed by Zager & Alpern (2010) They review what is called the Campus-Based Inclusion Model (CBIM). It "involves a partnership between an urban public school program for students with disabilities and a local college campus" (p. 153). Students take undergraduate courses in various areas like psychology, math, and history, as well as taking courses the students have the opportunity to work in a job on campus like the book store, library, and cafeteria. This program helps students with Autism and Asperger's learn self-determination and self-advocacy, as well as transition them into the college setting. Lastly, Shaw & Dukes (2001) discuss what the offices for students with disabilities on college campuses can do to support students with Autism and Asperger's. "the office that provides services for students with disabilities should assist students to assume the role of self-advocate, advocate for instruction in learning strategies (e.g. attention and memory strategies, self-monitoring, time management, organization, and problem solving)" (pp. 3-4). They also state that the disability service office should serve as an advocate for students to ensure they are receiving fair and equal treatment, and provide referral information on community resources like counseling services. With the help of administration, faculty and peers, students with Autism and

Asperger's can attend college and be successful in their time at a university. Everyone can succeed as long as they have the necessary supports and services to do so.

Synthesis

More research needs to be done about students with Autism and Asperger's entering college. As stated earlier, "As of 2007, 15,443 students between the ages of 18 and 21 years were identified as having Autism." (Hart, Grigal & Weir, 2010 p. 135). The number of students with Autism has increased since 2007, but exact numbers are unknown. Transitions are crucial to help prepare students with Autism and Asperger's for college. Universities of all kinds need to create more transitional services to help these students when they begin college. Individuals with Autism and Asperger's may have difficulties understanding subtle cues, or sarcasm. However, these students when provided with clear, specific directions can excel and be successful in many subjects. Parents are a key support system for these students with assisting them in tasks such as budgeting money, or making a schedule. Providing accommodations such as extended time on exams or a note taker for class can help students with Autism and Asperger's excel in college. Trainings for university administration and students can help people gain education and knowledge about Autism and Asperger's. Acceptance, openness, and patience are key for university administration, as well as students when working and interacting with these students. These positive traits can help students with Autism and Asperger's succeed in college. Handbooks that explain necessary skills for college can further assist students with Autism and Asperger's beginning college.

Chapter Three

Methods

The purpose of my capstone project was to research information regarding the struggles college students on the Autism Spectrum face. The review of literature shows some specific struggles these students go through during college. After learning that students on the Autism Spectrum need specific accommodations and supports while in college, I decided to interview four different disability service coordinators from various higher education institutions in Wisconsin. I asked them what specific life skills students on the spectrum need in order to be successful in college. These questions can be viewed in Appendix B. I also interviewed four different college students on the Autism Spectrum, asking them what life skills they felt students like themselves needed in order to do well in college. These questions are shown in Appendix C. I then decided to create a handbook that explains the transitional life skills students with Autism or Asperger's needed in order successfully complete college. The handbook can be found in Appendix A.

Site of Study

This study was conducted at a mid-size, public university in a small, Midwestern city. The total enrollment of this school is 12,034. There is a center at the university for students with disabilities that help over 70 students with Autism and Asperger's. There are many different accommodations available to aid those students in their classes at the university.

Participants

The interview sample consisted of four undergraduate students; two male students, one junior, one senior, and two females; one sophomore, and one who graduated. All of these

students have used services at the disability center. The other sample consisted of four disability service coordinators from four different higher education institutions in the Midwest. One is from a two year college, one from a technical school, one from a private university, and one from a public university. The student participants were recruited by me obtaining their names and email addresses from a specific disability coordinator who works at the public university. I received contact information for the disability service coordinators from the Director of the Disability Center at the public university. I contacted all participants via email, describing my capstone and asking for them to sign a consent form for interviewing them.

Study Questions

Phase One

Data collected in phase one addressed what specific life skills college students on the Autism Spectrum need in order to succeed in college. The three current undergraduate students were interviewed and asked to answer questions relating to what transitional life skills they felt students on the spectrum need in order to be successful in college. Another question that was asked was to explain how they are involved on campus (i.e. if they belong to any student organizations, or hold a job). The questions were answered verbally by the students during the in person interviews. For the female student who graduated her answers were received by email.

Phase Two

I interviewed three disability service coordinators over the phone and asked them what transitional life skills they felt students with Autism and Asperger's need in order to succeed in college. Their answers were transcribed as they were talking, by writing down their answers on a notepad. Another question that was asked was, In what activities did their students on the

spectrum participate? The fourth disability service coordinator was interviewed in person, because she worked at the public university where this project was conducted.

Instrumentation

I decided I wanted to ask the disability service coordinators and students on the spectrum questions regarding life skills that are important to have for college. I did this because the research I found stated that these students lacked certain life skills, and it would be important for me to find out what these individuals thought. The interview questions were asked to students and disability service coordinators in order to compare and contrast what each group identifies as important life skills students on the Autism Spectrum need to excel in college. I sent each service coordinator and students a consent form before conducting the interviews. The signatures I obtained from the participants consenting to the interviews in accordance with human subjects and obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before I conducted the interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each student's answers as well as each disability service coordinators answers were written down. The interviews of the students were conducted in October of 2012, with three of the interviews over the phone, and one via email. The interviews with the disability service coordinators were conducted in November of 2012, over the phone, and one in person. Each interview lasted 5 minutes. All of the interviews were conducted in the conference room of the disability center. To analyze the data I re-read all the interviewees responses and looked for common themes among them. For example, all the disability service coordinators said self-advocacy was an important skill for students on the spectrum to have. A common theme stated

by the students was that students on the spectrum should learn how to ask their professors for help. This information helped me to create the categories for my handbook.

Handbook Development

I designed the handbook, primarily from the findings from my student and disability service coordinator interviews. I looked at different types of handbooks to assist in formatting my handbook. I also designed it based off of the feedback I had asked for from the three disability service coordinators. The handbook was broken down into different sections of life skills. The life skills that were discussed were academic, social, financial, organizational, time-management, definitions of successful college students, more life skills suggested by disability service coordinators, and clubs/organizations students can join. In each of the different sections, I made simple bullet points in a list form. I did this because I wanted the handbook to look clean and be easy to read. My research from chapter two helped me to include social and financial skills as this was brought up as skills students with Autism and Asperger's struggle with. I also thought it would be beneficial to add what each of the four disability service coordinators thought a successful college student was. I felt this was necessary, since students with Autism and Asperger's work with a disability service coordinator throughout their college career. I lastly put a small list of potential clubs and organizations students may want to join. I obtained that information from the disability service coordinator interviews.

Handbook Evaluation

I had the handbook evaluated by three disability service coordinators from the disability center where this project was conducted. I gave each disability service coordinator a rough copy of my handbook and five questions regarding the content and format of the handbook. The

evaluation questions are available in Appendix D. To summarize the feedback from the disability service coordinators, it was suggested to remove some confusing sentences and words, clarify what full time student status is, and add two sections to the handbook. All of the feedback I received helped me to edit my handbook so that it was easy to read and understand.

Chapter four

Results

The answers from the interviews I conducted are showcased in my handbook.

Interviews

Of the four Disability Service Coordinators I asked to interview, I was able to interview all of them. The interviews with the disability service coordinators had many similarities. The average range of students they work with on a daily basis ranged from 5-65 students. All the coordinators identified self-advocacy as a key skill for students on the spectrum to have before entering college. Communication skills, as well as organization and planning skills were also mentioned. All the students on the spectrum held either a job on campus or off, or were a part of some student organizations; particularly video gaming and computer clubs were common. Being able to talk to their professors, set an alarm, go to class on time and doing their homework by themselves also were discussed in the interviews. For the skills they have seen the students they worked with possess it included self-advocacy, dedication, perseverance, and many of the other skills mentioned above before starting college. It appears self-advocacy, communication, and organization skills are the top three skills students on the Autism Spectrum need to possess to succeed in college. The disability service coordinators gave me their own definition of a successful college student. An example was, “A successful college student can function independently in the classroom. Also, they are someone who can use their emotional, social, and academic skill in the workplace.” Another definition given was; “A successful college student moves towards independence. They can also makes mistakes and learn from them. Remember nobody is perfect!”

I also interviewed four students on the Autism Spectrum. While their responses varied, many of the students said that asking professors for help, making sure to wake up on time for class, and completing homework assignments were key to success in college. Developing autonomy and independence by being able to complete tasks on their own, was also discussed in the student interviews. Many of the students had to learn how to do things by themselves, without the help of their parents, which proved to be difficult at first. However, over time with the right amount of support and accommodations through CSD, and their professors, all the students interviewed have been successful in college thus far. One of the students even graduated with her Bachelor's Degree. All of the students I interviewed have or currently hold a job on campus. Many of them have or do work in the campus library organizing books. Social situations still prove to be difficult for many of the students. While some have a small group of friends, others it seemed to prefer keeping to themselves, and felt more comfortable talking to staff than their fellow peers. This may be due to the fact that these students may have been made fun of by their peers.

Feedback from Disability Service Coordinators

I received some minor feedback for my handbook from three disability service coordinators. The coordinators answered the five evaluation questions I sent them via email. One of the disability service coordinators had me add two sections of my handbook which were organization, and time management. She also had me fix some confusing statements, and get rid of unnecessary words, and include the link to the student organizations website, JOIN. Another disability service coordinator suggested that I make a note that to be a full time student one needs to take 12 credits. Also, another suggestion from a different coordinator was to get rid of the word RA's, since most high school students would not know what that meant.

Handbook Modification

To modify my handbook, I took all the feedback I received from three disability service coordinators, and modified what they suggested from the five evaluation questions they answered. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get feedback from the other three of the coordinators or the director due to their schedules being very busy. However, I feel that the feedback I did receive helped me improve the handbook even further.

Chapter five

Conclusions/Recommendations

I recommend this handbook to be used by disability services at universities, and two year colleges. The information in the handbook can serve as a guide to students on the Autism Spectrum who are interested in attending college. The handbook explains what life skills will be helpful to do well in college. It also can be used to students on the spectrum already in college, who may be facing some unexpected challenges, and can use the handbook for advice. Continued research on students with Autism and Asperger's in college still needs to be done, in order to effectively help these students flourish in college.

Conclusions

The research I have gathered suggests that with the right amount of support, students on the Autism Spectrum can be successful in college. The main life skills students with Autism and Asperger's need for college are self-independence skills, organizational skills, self-advocacy, and the ability to effectively communicate their needs. The four disability service coordinators stressed the importance of having the students on the spectrum gain work experience while in college, as this will help them gain further life skills that will ease their transition to the real world.

Modifications

To modify the handbook I created, I added color to the title page and clip art that represented college. Adding color and photos made my handbook stand out and made it more aesthetically pleasing to the eye.

Limitations

It is important to note that there are limitations to this study. First, only four students on the Autism Spectrum were interviewed. This is due to many students on the Spectrum not being able to verbalize clearly their thoughts, as well as being uncomfortable with interviews. This small number will allow for only a limited viewpoint from students on the spectrum. In addition, all the students on the spectrum who were interviewed were from the same four year public university. Interviewing more students from different types of institutions may have provided more unique feedback. It may be helpful to interview students on the Autism Spectrum from a two year college, or a private university to see how their experiences vary with those from a public four year university. This may also help compare what kinds of experiences college students on the Autism Spectrum are having at various higher education institutions. Another limitation is that only four disability service coordinators were interviewed, which also will only give a select opinion regarding important life skills students with Asperger's and Autism need. However, not every disability center at public universities has students on the Autism Spectrum. The four coordinators were selected because they work with students specifically with Autism and Asperger's. A wider range of opinions regarding important life skills for students with Autism and Asperger's would be available, if more disability service coordinators in Wisconsin worked specifically with these students.

Recommendations

I suggest that any disability center at a higher education institution, that assists students on the Autism Spectrum have a copy of this handbook. This handbook can help all incoming students on the Autism Spectrum with the skills they need to prosper in college, and can serve as

an aid to students on the spectrum in their second, third, or fourth year of school. This handbook may also assist Disability Services offices by helping them to explore new types of accommodations and services to further help these students. Collaboration of disability services offices between public, private, two and four year university higher education institutions can help maintain and update the handbook for future students on the Autism Spectrum.

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Transitional Life Skills students with Autism and Asperger's need to succeed in college



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Background information:

-This handbook was created for students with Autism and Asperger's interested in going to college. This handbook lists what Academic, Social, Financial, Organizational, and Time Management Life skills are important for students to be successful in college.

-Many students with Autism and Asperger's experience difficulties with the following life skills in college that are listed. It is important to identify these challenges so students can recognize areas they may need to work on before going to college.

-This handbook also can be used for students with Autism and Asperger's if they help with any transitions that may come up in their college career.

-List form and bullet points are used to make this handbook very readable for all students on the Autism Spectrum.

Academic Life Skills needed for college

- Get your homework done on time
- Read the class syllabus
- Write down assignments in a planner
- Ask professor for help, if you don't understand something
- Study for exams a few days ahead of time, and not just the night before
- Fill out the study guides for tests if professor gives you one
- Let your disability service coordinator know if you are having trouble in a class
- Don't skip class
- If you have to miss class get notes and assignments from a fellow classmate

Social Life Skills needed for college

- Say hello to your classmates
- Keep your dorm door open so people can say hello
- Get to know your peers in your dorm and on your dorm floor
- Make eye contact with others
- Think before you speak
- Join clubs/organizations on campus to make friends
- Listen to a conversation first before making a comment
- Participate in class by asking a question, or making a suggestion
- Ask a classmate to lunch or dinner with you

Financial Life Skills needed for college

- Save your money in a savings account
- Don't spend all your money on things you do not need (like video games)
- Keep track of your spending each week
- Ask your parents for help with budgeting your money
- Try not to eat out every day, use your meal plan
- Try to buy items on sale
- Always pay your bills on time
- Go to the bank on campus for any questions you have about money

Organizational Life Skills needed for college

- Make a list of the assignments you have to get done each day
- Cross out assignments in your planner after you finish them
- Take notes during class and type them up afterwards
- Make sure your desk is not cluttered
- Use different colored binders and notebooks for each class
- Write down what time you have class each day in your planner
- Make sure to always bring pencils and pens to class
- Put what binders and folders you need for class in your backpack the night before so you don't have to worry about it in the morning

Time Management Life Skills needed for college

- Set an alarm to wake up to in the morning
- Break up big projects and papers into smaller parts each day
- Do your homework at a set time each day when you are most awake
- Start studying for an exam a few weeks in advance by looking over notes and homework for half an hour
- Get all your homework first before doing fun activities
- Write down in your planner or phone when you have meetings or appointments
- Complete assignments that are due the next day first
- Read the chapters your professor assigns by the next class period

Definitions of a successful college student by Disability Service Coordinators:

“A successful college student can function independently in the classroom. Also, they are someone who can use their emotional, social, and academic skill in the workplace.”

“A successful college student moves towards independence. They can also makes mistakes and learn from them. Remember nobody is perfect!”

“A successful college student wants to get know oneself, gain self-advocacy skills, and is open to new ideas and people.”

“A successful college student is someone who successfully completes their goals.”

More life skills needed to succeed in college

- Get yourself to sleep without anyone telling you to do so
- Get enough sleep, try for 7-8 hours a night
- Get up in the morning without anyone having to wake you up
- Shower, brush your teeth and hair everyday
- Do your own laundry, and put away your clothes
- Take your medication without any reminders
- Set up your own appointments with your professors
- Don't be late for class
- Turn off your computer, television, and Xbox when you have to work on homework
- Know how to use a cell phone
- Ask for help when you are stressed
- Learn how to get around campus by yourself, and use a campus map
- Take a lighter academic load your first semester, 9-12 credits max

*It's important to remember that to be a full-time student you have to take 12 credits.

Clubs/Organizations you may want to join

- Video game club (students get together and play games on the Xbox, PlayStation, or Wii)
- Anime club (Japanese cartoons)
- Intermural sports (sports where you don't have to try-out for)
- Music or Theatre clubs (students sing for fun or put on plays)
- Chess club (play a game of chess with students)

Ask your classmates and people in your dorm what clubs or organizations they are in! This can give you more ideas as to what you might want to join.

Look on campus for posters from clubs/orgs listing what days and times they meet.

Check out the link below to the Student Organization Database JOIN!

<https://uww-community.symplicity.com/index.php?au=&ck>

Appendix B: Interview questions for Disability Service Coordinators

1. How many students on the spectrum do you work with on a weekly basis?
2. What life skills do you feel students on the spectrum need in order to be successful in college?
3. What skills have you seen the students you work with possess that have made them successful in college?
4. What is your definition of a successful college student?
5. What high impact practices do students on the spectrum participate in?

Appendix C: Interview questions for students on the Autism Spectrum

1. What life skills academically (making appointments with professors, reading your class syllabus, getting your homework done) do you feel students with Autism and Asperger's need in order to be successful in college?
2. What life skills socially (hanging out with friends, talking to peers in your classes and dorm) do you feel students with Autism and Asperger's need in order to be successful in college?
3. What life skills financially (Spending your money on food, having a bank account) do you feel students with Autism and Asperger's need in order to be successful in college?
4. What life skills did you have to learn before you started college?
5. What life skills do you use yourself that have helped you be successful in college? (could be any skill like setting an alarm, organizing folders and binders, asking for help from professors)

Appendix D: Handbook evaluation questions

1. Does the “Background Information” clearly explain the purpose of the handbook?
2. What information needs to be expanded on?
3. What information is unnecessary?
4. Is there any topic you feel should be added to the handbook?
5. How do you feel about the format of the handbook?