

Challenges Autistic Students Face While Transitioning into Higher Education Institutions

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We ask you to join us in creating a culture that reflects...

Access and Inclusion

and

Civility and Respect

...this week and in all aspects of our organization.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Defined

- Neurodiversity has emerged as both a conceptual framework and a civil rights movement that recognizes neurological differences as natural variations in human cognition rather than deficits requiring correction (Harmon, 2004).
 - Under the umbrella term Neurodiversity, ASD is understood as part of a broader range of neurodevelopmental differences often referred to as learning differences.

ASD Defined

- ASD is characterized by persistent differences in social communication and interaction, alongside restricted or repetitive behaviors and interests, as defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
- Individuals on the autism spectrum may also experience executive functioning challenges, sensory sensitivities, and a preference for routine and structure (Demetriou et al., 2019).

ASD in Government (1)

- Legislative efforts promoting disability inclusion, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, have encouraged institutions to improve accessibility and promote equitable participation in academic and campus environments (Pillay & Bath, 2012).

ASD in Government (2)

- When evaluating cases involving individuals with disabilities and/or reasonable accommodations our guiding legal standards are as follows:
 - Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973
 - Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act is a federal law that adds more specificity around discrimination against people with disabilities, prohibiting any entity that receives federal financial assistance (such as grants or student loans) from discriminating against this population (*Disability discrimination*)
 - Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
 - Signed into law by President George H.W. Bush in 1990 and amended in 2008 (*Guides: History of the Americans*).
 - The law provides various civil rights protections for those with disabilities, including banning employment discrimination and mandates for reasonable accommodations (*Guides: History of the Americans*).

ASD in Government (3)

Despite protection under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), discriminatory practices continue to arise on college campuses for individuals with disabilities.

Halpern v. Wake Forest University Health Sciences (2012)

- A student with ADHD and anxiety disorder in the Doctor of Medicine program at Wake Forest University Health Sciences faced professionalism issues.
- Halpern demonstrated “abusive behavior” and was resistant to feedback. Halpern received some accommodations in relation to exam timings, but his unprofessional behavior ultimately led to his dismissal from the program.
- Court favored Wake Forest University holding that Halpern was not “otherwise qualified” to participate in the medical school’s program, with or without reasonable accommodation.

ASD in Higher Education (1)

As access to higher education expands, increasing numbers of students with ASD are enrolling in colleges and universities (Brett, 2016; Swart & Greyling, 2011).

- Cox et al. (2026) estimated
 - 42.9%–47.0% of autistic high school students go on to enroll in higher education.
 - 2.8%–4.0% of students registered with their colleges' Disability Services Offices are autistic.
 - 0.3%–4.7% of all undergraduates are autistic.
 - There are currently between 135,400 and 286,254 autistic undergraduate students in the United States (Cox et al., 2026).

Activity: Case Scenario (1)

Alex is a first-year student on the autism spectrum who recently started at a large public university. During the first six weeks of the semester:

- Alex attends classes regularly and performs well on exams.
- He struggles with managing multiple deadlines and often submits assignments late.
- Group projects create significant anxiety because classmates frequently change meeting times without notice.
- Loud environments, such as the student union and crowded dining hall, are overwhelming.
- Alex has not registered with Disability Services because he does not want to be viewed differently from his peers.
- His professors notice he rarely participates in class discussions and often leaves immediately after class.

Recently, Alex emailed an academic advisor stating:

- "I'm doing okay academically, but college feels exhausting. I'm not sure who to ask for help."

Activity: Case Scenario (2)

Question 1

- What barriers is Alex experiencing?

Question 2

- Which barriers are individual challenges, and which are environmental or institutional barriers?

Question 3

- What campus resources, accommodations, or supports could improve Alex's transition and retention?

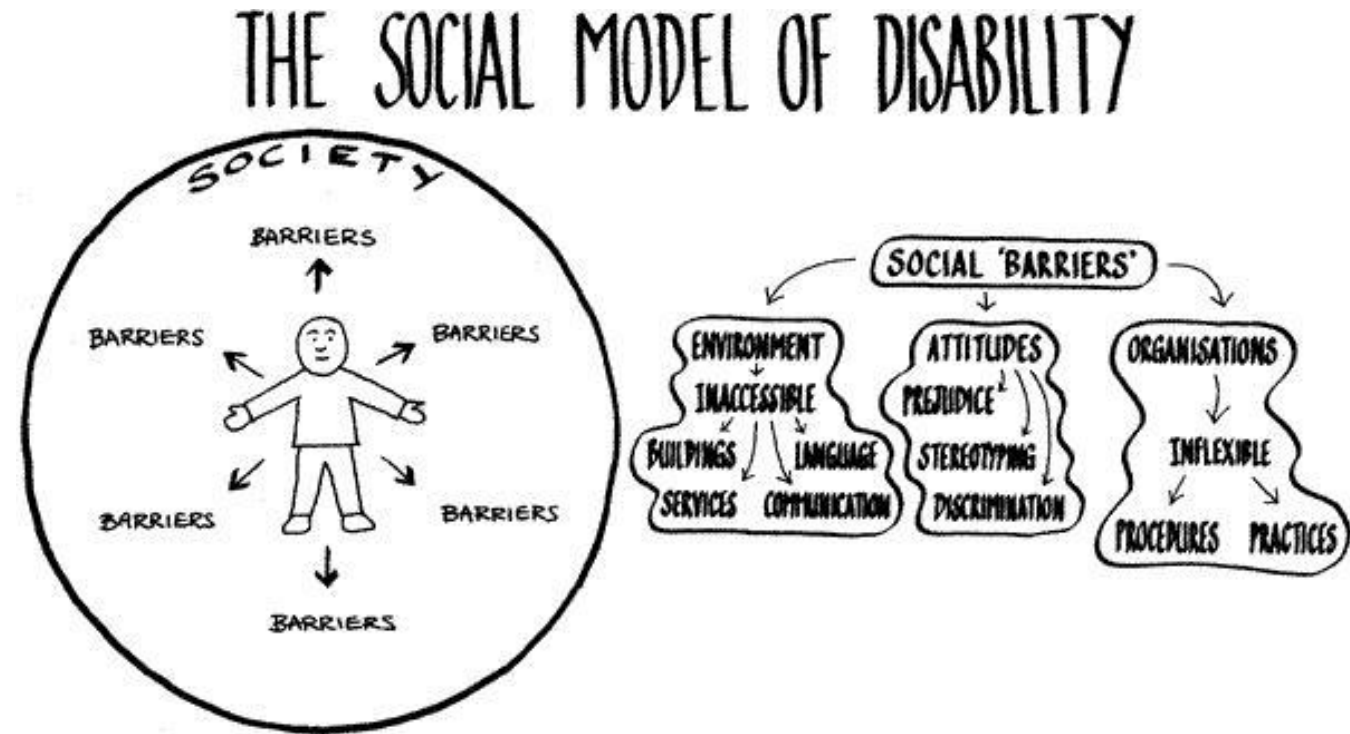
Question 4

- What proactive steps could faculty, advisors, and student affairs professionals take before a student reaches a crisis point?

Activity: Case Scenario (3)

Social Model of Disability

- Full participation in society has little to do with the abilities of a person who is disabled, but the societal constructs that prohibit them from inclusion.



Rather than viewing Alex as the problem, the Social Model asks:

- *"How can the institution reduce barriers and create environments where students can succeed?"*

Examples:

- Predictable course structures
- Flexible meeting options
- Faculty training
- Peer mentoring

ASD in Higher Education (2)

- Existing research suggests that students on the autism spectrum frequently rely on personal coping strategies and self-advocacy skills to navigate academic, social, and institutional expectations.
 - Qualitative studies consistently identify self-advocacy, structured organizational practices, and peer mentoring as key contributors to persistence and academic engagement (Pinder-Amaker, 2014).

ASD at Florida Atlantic (1)

- Interventions & Support
 - CARD
 - Center for Autism & Related Disabilities provides expert consulting, training, and support, at no charge, for all people with autism and related disabilities, their families, employers, professionals, and community and governmental agencies serving them.
- Student Accessibility Services
 - Provides the institution with resources, education, and direct services so that individuals with disabilities may have a greater opportunity to achieve excellence in education.

ASD at Florida Atlantic (2)

- Interventions & Support
 - Mentoring
 - The Presidential Mentorship Program connects students, alumni, faculty, and community members to build meaningful relationships that support academic success, career exploration, and personal growth.
 - Specialty Offerings:
 - FAU Academy for Community Inclusion is a comprehensive transition program for adults with intellectual disabilities and continues to employ peer mentors to support our students with intellectual disabilities.
 - iRISE2, Interest and Relationships Impacting Social Engagement and Employment, is a mentoring program offered at FAU's Center for Autism and Related Disabilities.
 - iRISE2 Mentoring Program serves youth and young adults ages 11-35 (with flexibility) with autism and related disabilities. These programs aim to help these youth and young adults reach their full potential for personal development and independence while enriching their social-cognitive capacity through interest-based mentoring.

ASD in Higher Education (3)

- Many institutions remain insufficiently prepared to address the transition needs of students with ASD.
 - Disclosure barriers and student reluctance to engage with disability support services further complicate efforts to accurately assess enrollment and retention outcomes (Wilkinson, 2012; Cullen, 2015).
- Institutional support often remains fragmented, placing responsibility for adaptation primarily on students rather than addressing systemic barriers that influence retention and success.

ASD in Higher Education (4)

- Recommendations/Takeaways:
 - **Move Beyond Accommodation Toward Inclusion**
 - Shift from reactive accommodation models to proactive institutional design that reduces barriers before students experience crisis.
 - **Normalize Early Support & Reduce Disclosure Barriers**
 - Create systems that make support visible, accessible, and stigma-free without requiring students to repeatedly self-advocate.

ASD in Higher Education (5)

- Recommendations/Takeaways:
 - **Expand Belonging and Connection Opportunities**
 - Invest in:
 - Peer mentoring
 - Transition programming
 - Interest-based communities
 - Social integration initiatives

ASD in Higher Education (6)

- Recommendations/Takeaways:
 - Don't ask:
“How do students adapt to the institution?”
 - Ask:
“How does the institution adapt to support student success?”

References

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Session Evaluation

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Thank you for attending!

Your feedback helps shape future programming.

