

# Working with College Students on the Autism Spectrum



## What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that is characterized by the presence of restrictive movements, repetitive interests, and impairments in social communication.

## The Spectrum of Autism

Autism exists on a wide spectrum, and students with ASD may have dual mental and physical health diagnoses.

Additionally, diversity and sociocultural factors will impact the presentation, behaviors, and coping mechanisms of students on the autism spectrum.

## Prevalence of ASD

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (CDC), approximately 1 in 54 children has been identified with ASD.

## College Students with ASD

Approximately 34.7% of individuals with ASD enroll in college six years after completing high school.

## Graduation Rates and Retention

National statistics indicate that only 38.8% of college students with ASD will complete their degree. This statistic highlights the importance of being responsive to the needs of our students on the Autism Spectrum and in turn, strive to increase the graduate rates and retention of these valued members of our campus community.

## The Transition to College

Upon arriving on a college campus, students with ASD face a range of daunting tasks, including navigating independent living, advocating for themselves, establishing and maintaining new relationships, and managing social and emotional challenges.

### Information Source

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) | <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>

Center on Transition | <https://centerontransition.org/publications/download.cfm?id=64>

DeOrnellas, K. (2015) | Teaching College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders |

<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/teaching-college-students-with-autism-spectrum-disorders/>

# STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Students on the autism spectrum have a wide range of strengths that are beneficial for the student and the campus community. Despite their many strengths, students with ASD may experience challenges when navigating the transition to college.

## STRENGTHS

College students with ASD may tend to fixate on one subject, which often leads to mastery of that subject.

Individuals with ASD tend to be honest and direct.

Students on the autism spectrum are often reliable and can be counted on to follow-through with their responsibilities and obligations.

## CHALLENGES

Students on the autism spectrum may lose focus or experience challenges in retaining information with subjects that are not as stimulating for the student.

Students on the autism spectrum may experience difficulty with expressing empathy as others may expect.

While rules and expectations can lessen the distress and anxiety students on the autism spectrum experience, the rigidity of needing to follow the rules can increase anxiety.

## ADDITIONAL ON-CAMPUS RESOURCES

Office of Accessibility and Accommodations  
oaa@contact.pacificu.edu

Student Counseling Center  
counselingcenter@pacificu.edu  
(503) 352-2191

Office of Student Support  
<https://www.pacificu.edu/life-pacific/support-safety/student-support-services/contact-us>

Academic and Career Advising  
advisingcenter@pacificu.edu

# TIPS AND STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

As a professor, you have a role in helping students develop critical life skills and navigating developmental tasks. College students often have challenges developing skills related to prioritizing, time management, communication, and managing emotions. Students on the autism spectrum may experience additional challenges navigating typical developmental tasks of emerging adulthood, due to atypical neural development.

## ROUTINES AND SCHEDULES

Students with ASD often experience executive function challenges, and providing a detailed and routine schedule, as well as informing students of any changes to classroom policies, expectations, or changes to the syllabus can be helpful in reducing emotional distress.

## FEEDBACK

Many students with ASD struggle with conceptualizing their own progress and may be surprised when receiving midterm or final grades. Providing an update on the student's progress halfway through the semester can help the student identify any areas of concern.

## COMMUNICATION

Communication difficulties are a hallmark of ASD. Providing a range of communication methods allows students on the autism spectrum to participate and interact with professors and students without becoming overwhelmed or overstimulated.

## PRIORITIZATION

Challenges with executive function such as organization and planning can lead to challenges with prioritizing assignments and other due dates for students on the autism spectrum. While the syllabus may be overwhelming for some students, working with students to identify the order in which more complex assignments and projects should be completed can be beneficial and help the student in meeting due dates.

## CLASSROOM BEHAVIORS

A primary characteristic of ASD involves repetitive and restrictive behaviors, activities, and interests. When an activity is novel or a change from a regular routine, the student may engage in behaviors such as rocking, wringing their hands, and pacing to relieve their stress. It can be helpful to allow students to take a break and leave the classroom, if necessary.

## PROCESSING INFORMATION

Students with ASD may experience a delay in processing information and data, which can result in long pauses before answering questions in class and challenges when being asked to complete time-limited tasks. Giving students on the autism spectrum a "heads up" when you would like their input will give them time to organize their thoughts.

## SENSORY CHALLENGES

Students with ASD may be sensitive to lights, sounds, tastes, smells, and tactile sensations. Checking in when noticing students on the autism spectrum appear distressed to share your observation can be helpful. For instance, wearing sunglasses in class may reduce light sensitivity.