

Supporting Students on the Autism Spectrum

My Professor Can't Teach! What College Students Can Do to Accommodate Themselves

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The stage is set. You successfully started college, ready to learn. Your teacher passes out the syllabus which states that you will have four tests and one paper. As the weeks go by, you realize there are assignments that were not mentioned in the syllabus. In addition, you are unsure what will be on the test or when the test will be. Your teacher suggests that you study the chapter, but what does that mean? You read some of the chapter, but after a half an hour you're starting to doze off and you can't remember what you just read. In class you try to follow the professor's lecture, but you can't seem to remember everything said. Even with the PowerPoint, you find yourself spacing out and missing all the information. You try to take notes but it is impossible to hear it, process it, reword it and write it back down. You try your best and maybe pass the class but ultimately come to the conclusion that your professor can't teach!

As academic coordinators at The College Internship Program, we have witnessed the challenges college students experience every day. We coach the students on social



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and executive functions in the academic environment and we teach them academic skills. We've observed that once they are in college, they are expected to know how to extract information and how to infer missing information, based on the well-intending professor's instructions. These skills are challenging for all students, but even more so for those with ASD (Anderson et al., 2017).



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Ideally, a college professor would create a class structure adapted to multiple learning styles by using a variety of teaching techniques, such as drill and practice, study guide worksheets, lecture and interactive class discussion. They would allow multiple opportunities to assess what was learned such as activities, group work, essays, tests and projects. The teacher would provide a supplemental timeline

complete with due dates and objectives. Their ideal professor would take a percentage off for late work, drop a test, substitute the final for the lowest test and provide a copy of notes and PowerPoints. While many do create the utopian college environment, the reality is that college professors are not required to provide this degree of structure. The expectation is that the students adapt themselves to the academic environment. Colleges attempt to assist the students with adapting by providing services such as the accommodations for students with disabilities, learning labs, peer support and on-campus therapy. They help the students to manage their time, track their assignments, apply study skills, find assistive technology, talk to their instructors, and use coping strategies. Parents and support groups can provide the nudge necessary to encourage the students to access these supports. Ultimately, it is the student's responsibility to create their best learning environment without inconveniencing others.

Building a Structure by
Managing Environment

Regardless of a students exceptionalities, there is a standard structure to be followed

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that creates the foundation of learning success that begins when the students first enrolls in college. This structure must stay in place throughout the college experience, even if the student is doing well. That way, if the physical or personal environment were to change, a support system is already in place.

Disabilities Services

Research suggests that faculty have limited understanding of the ADA and a student's rights to modifications in a university setting, therefore it is critical that students with ASD register with the university's office of student disabilities (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). Once a student has registered, a counseling appointment will be made. The counselor will discuss your academic interests, help your with your trajectory, and most importantly, set the student up with accommodations specific to their needs. Some of the most common accommodations include extended time on exams, note-taking services, and access to assistive technology. From there, students must advocate for themselves by presenting their letter of accommodation to their professors, so they can be assisted with their needs. It will also be up to the student to request for extended time on each exam, so that an alternate testing date, time, and distraction-free location can be arranged.

Accommodations and Additional Support

Just as a support system must be built, the student must employ strategies to supplement their learning experience. Many colleges and private tutors offer seminars as well as individualized instruction to help develop these strategies. Matching students' learning-style preferences with educational interventions compatible with those preferences is also beneficial to their academic achievement (Dunn et al., 2010). For example a student may prefer to listen to a lecture, rather than keep their eyes focused on the screen due to light sensitivity. Another accommodation might be given to record lectures. Any assistive technology provided by the college will come with support on how to use the equipment, and what to do with the information after it is recorded. This same student may prefer to rewrite the material and to verbally review. This may not come naturally, so they will need to practice with a support specialist, who can show them how to adapt to their specific learning needs. Family members can also help by teaching the ASD student how and when to appropriately interact with support staff through scripting and roll play (Anderson et al., 2017).

Organizing Time

On the first day of class, students will

be handed a syllabus. This document can be used to set up a calendar, preferably on a smartphone. Due dates can be plugged in for various assignments and exams, with alarm reminders to keep students on task. In addition, it is wise to input regular weekly study times, to help develop a routine that doesn't interfere with other obligations. A "grade tracker" can also be developed to keep track of grades throughout the term. Using programs like Google Sheets or Microsoft Excel can aid in calculating grade averages.

The syllabus is an important tool to help manage time, but what should a student do when information is missing? Families and mentors can advise students on how to appropriately approach support staff to assist with an email to teachers to discuss and disclose their needs in the class as well as to clarify requirements and due dates.

Conclusion

While testing may reveal where the challenges lie initially, students can find what works best for them through experience and reflection with families and support staff. Through this metacognitive process, strategies can be developed and executed by the student to create an environment conducive to learning.

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