

Career Advising Students With Asperger's Syndrome

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NACE Journal, September 2012

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of college and university students disclosing a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome. Several assumptions have been made as to why there is an increase, most of which revolve around greater access to resources, improved diagnostics, and an overall higher prevalence of Asperger's in the general population. While it is difficult to determine the nature of the increase, it is important that higher education professionals educate themselves on best practices and strategies for working with this student population to better assist these students in reaching their career goals.¹

Students with Asperger's syndrome face many issues in preparing for life beyond the college years. While counseling services and disability services on campus can offer a tremendous amount of support, often career services helps students through the career discernment process and other transitional issues these students will face while planning for their careers. Unfortunately, there has been little training available for career services professionals on working with this student population. In addition, much of the research and information available has focused on younger children, not the college student population with which career services works on a daily basis. This article provides an overview of Asperger's syndrome so that career professionals can understand the characteristics and identify possible strategies to help them work with these students.

Understanding Asperger's Syndrome

Asperger's syndrome (AS) is an autism spectrum disorder, mainly differing from autism in that language skills and intelligence are not affected, and are often above average. AS is characterized by impaired social skills, repetitive patterns of behavior, and restricted interests. Additional characteristics include motor clumsiness and sensory impairment. The syndrome is a neurological disorder that affects the ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. Both the National Institutes of Health and World Health Organization state that AS adults often develop psychiatric symptoms and disorders that can include depressive disorder, anxiety disorder, attention-deficit disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Other symptoms, including low self-esteem and learned helplessness, also can develop. It is important for career services professionals to understand how these characteristics may affect the students that they serve.

Students with Asperger's (Aspies) experience difficulty with social interactions. It may be hard for them to make or keep friends. They may have difficulty with standard social cues, rules, and behaviors.

Strong communication skills are often at the top of the list of skills that employers seek, but Aspies often have difficulties with verbal communication skills. This difficulty may present as talking too much about an interest. So, in an interview, an employer may ask a student to describe an interest and the Asperger's student may talk excessively about that interest. As a result, the student may lose focus and lose out on that position.

Aspies also learn to develop coping strategies when feeling stressed or under pressure. This may be something as innocent as cracking knuckles repetitively or some other repetitive behavior (also known as "stimming"). After spending time in an advising session with a student, a career professional may begin to notice this pattern of behavior. Also, if the student is challenged to think differently or behave outside of his or her normal comfort level, the frequency of this behavior may increase. Repetitive patterns of behavior may also present as a strict adherence to routines or daily rituals. With many Aspies, the predictability of doing specific activities or tasks the same way every day may provide a sense of comfort or security in an otherwise insecure world. Career services should consider how to advise a student to answer a behavioral interview question that challenges this coping mechanism.

These students may also experience a heightened sensitivity to sensory data—vision, smell, hearing, or touch—which can distract them from the tasks at hand. For an Aspie with a heightened sensitivity to sounds, for example, an environment with a great deal of talking, typing, or other sounds may be extremely distracting and cause him or her to lose focus. This can hinder interview as well as job performance.

It has also been noted that Aspies have some difficulty with social cues and understanding unwritten rules. So not only may Aspies have "issues" with invading personal space when speaking, but also they may experience difficulty in understanding the term "invading personal space" due to their tendency to be very literal in their speech and comprehension. Sarcasm, slang, jokes, and similar language, or using voice tone and inclination to dictate sarcasm may not be as obvious to an Aspie. Lastly, much of the literature notes a certain level of clumsiness or awkwardness. Many Aspies grow out of this; however, others do not.

Given the common characteristics, it is easy to see why these students are often misunderstood. For example, they may be viewed as rude or offensive given their often brutally honest and direct communication style. When engaging in conversation, Aspies may speak in a monotonous tone that lacks inflection, which could make it difficult to construe meaning. They may be seen as pretentious, given their often formal use of language. Often loners, they may be viewed as shy or, due to their propensity to talk excessively about a topic they are interested in, they may appear to be talking at people and not interested in the other person's participation in the conversation. Their coping behaviors may make them appear odd to others. Understanding and recognizing some of the characteristics will help career professionals work with Aspies.

Most employers prize communication, teamwork, analytical skills, motivation, leadership, flexibility, and organization skills in job candidates—skills that Aspies may find challenging. However, there are also highly sought skills that Aspies may demonstrate. Positions in engineering, higher education faculty, fine arts, research, or medicine may be a good fit for some, given their ability to often hone in on research, study a given topic, or speak at great length with great passion and enthusiasm about a given subject. Career professionals can help students adjust and acquire skills if they have not already gained them. Increasing the Aspie's confidence in interviewing or helping the Aspie to obey social cues and professional etiquette can be accomplished by repetition and exposure to situations the student may face in the interviewing process or on the job. Career professionals can also help employers understand these characteristics and show the potential value in considering and hiring Aspies. Many accommodations (if needed) are mostly low or no cost to employers.

Practical Strategies for Helping Asperger's Students

Frequently career services practitioners use a more developmental approach in working with students, where counseling professionals may use a more psychoanalytic approach. An approach in working with Aspies may be more successful if it is more behavioral (i.e. modifying learned behaviors by replacing them with new behaviors) or occupational (i.e. teaching or modeling those activities or skills which would be considered activities of daily living—ADL).

Following are some approaches career services professionals can use in advising students with AS.

Identify Campus Resources in Advance

In general, to be successful, you should work to identify helpful campus resources in advance. Counseling services, disability services, and faculty can be of assistance. Consider developing a team or advocating being part of an existing team or committee designed to help enhance services and resources provided for students with Asperger's. In doing so, remember that each student is different, and while you can work to develop a protocol, developing strategies to work with students should be creative and handled on a case-by-case basis. Try to keep the approach focused on results, while enhancing skills and building confidence in each student.

Promote Services to Aspies

In serving as a resource, promote services and resources to this particular student population. Offer special events that feel inclusive to Aspies or provide special activities during regularly scheduled programs that may draw them in. Consider adding engaging activities such as games or puzzles that require group participation during an open house. Try attending orientation programs and holding individual conversations with students, especially those that may not be

interacting as much with the general group. Often, Aspies may find a perceived adult easier to speak with, or may be more accustomed to interacting with adults given their advanced language skills and/or extensive knowledge of a given topic. Being approachable and continuing to interact with the student may draw in those students that may have difficulty interacting with their peers, thus making the career center a "safe place" for the student. Consider engaging with the students by attending meetings and clubs that may be of interest to Aspies (writing club, anime club, fencing, humane society, and so forth).

Prepare Your Staff To Work With Aspies

Emily, a freshman, has decided to stop by the career office during her free time between classes. She doesn't know why she's stopping by other than she's bored and had nothing else better to do (and she remembered someone speaking during her anime club meeting about activities in the office to "kill time"). As the receptionist approaches, Emily abruptly informs the receptionist that she cannot stay because she has classes and cannot come for drop-in hours because she had not planned to do so beforehand. She believes her professors will be mad at her if she is late. She also states that there are a lot of people that have to cross the main campus street at the same time and she'd just rather get to class on time or she will not have a good experience in class. Finally she says she doesn't know why she would even want to schedule an appointment anyway because no one can help "someone like her." After several attempts, the receptionist convinces Emily to schedule an appointment for another day that will work for her.

You have probably had this student in the office before. How do you work with this student? How do you know that this student is an Aspie? What training have you given to the reception area staff to ensure that this student's needs are addressed? What follow-up measures are in place for reception area staff to inform you of such interactions?

Consider the common characteristics (or misperceptions) that may lead staff to believe that they are working with an Aspie (i.e. the student appears to be apathetic; has a special interest; is abrupt, rigid, and relying on a daily routine for comfort; and is sensitive to sensory overload-too many people crossing the street, feels anxious, and so forth). While career services professionals cannot diagnose students, there are strategies that can be used to calm and engage these students.

Eric, a student you are trying to help with internship search, says his supervisor at the university help desk told Eric that he loves when faculty and students question his knowledge of computer programming and troubleshooting. Per Eric, the supervisor also stated that his very best and brightest employees are the ones that always ask him a ton of questions as if he doesn't know what he is doing. Eric was confused and upset when his supervisor reprimanded and later fired him for asking him several questions and questioning his computer troubleshooting tactics. Eric says that this happens to him all the time and he is now extremely anxious about finding and maintaining an internship. How would you help Eric? What are some of the common characteristics (or misperceptions) in the example that may indicate that you are working with an Aspie?

Try to provide some education, and calming and coping strategies for the reception area staff (those making the appointments and first engaging with students). Consider having disability services or counseling services talk to staff about handling difficult students or situations. Develop a system for documentation or notation of interactions with this student.

Working One-on-One With an Aspie

Once you are able to meet with the student one-on-one, get to know him or her. If the student discloses that he or she has Asperger's, find out what that means to the student in terms of strengths and areas for improvement. This will also help the student should he or she need to disclose to a potential employer in the future.

Be sure to explain in detail how you can help, specific resources and services that you will provide, and how you will want him or her to use those resources and tools.

Work with the student to develop benchmarks and measurable goals. A goal for a student who does not have AS may be to complete all grad school materials by the end of fall semester. For an Aspie, that may be the overall goal, but you should set smaller, more attainable goals and benchmarks to document progress along the way. This will ensure that the student stays motivated and engaged by seeing small progress and not overwhelming the student with the overall picture. It will be helpful for both you and the student to always write everything down and provide copies.

Work with the student to agree on a plan of action for your work together. Be very specific about what you hope to accomplish, and develop a plan or a general timeline for accomplishing tasks. Given some of the common characteristics and potential associated conditions (i.e., ADD, learned helplessness, and so on), it may be easy for the student to get distracted or hung up on a particular part of the action plan. Be sure to include strategies for staying on-target with the predetermined goals in the action plan. Document progress, take copious notes, and share as much as possible with the student.

Given that some Aspies may not be aware of what common social cues and rules are, it may be necessary to set behavioral expectations as well (i.e., it is not appropriate to lick fingers, take shoes on and off, play with staplers). Try to be mindful of potential stimming as a coping mechanism. Provide alternative activities for coping, such as a stress ball or Rubik's Cube—but be careful that the tool provided is not too distracting.

Lastly, is your office sensory friendly? Bright lights, loud or continuous noises, and/or perfumed plugins could prove to be distracting to the students and may prohibit them from accomplishing goals (or possibly might make them not want to return to the office).

Major and Career Advising for Asperger's Students

In general, you can approach major and career advising as you would with any student, but may need to provide the Aspie with more: You may have to go in to more detail, spend more time, or explain things that are abstract.

For any student, finding the right "fit" can make a huge difference, and this is particularly true for an Aspie. Many adults with Asperger's have noted much distress on the job and in their work until being diagnosed and developing strategies to determine fit.

Find out if the student has ever held a job or been exposed to the world of work. If the student has, focus discussion on the types of work to which he or she has been exposed, specific tasks and responsibilities undertaken, and whether or not he or she found enjoyment or satisfaction through those experiences.

If the student has not been exposed, ask questions to determine interest and familiarity with positions. Ask about his or her "dream" job, but keep in mind Aspies' literal understanding of language. (You may need to explain that this is just a phrase and doesn't have to be a job he or she literally dreamt of.) Be patient with the student. Many students may be vague when answering these questions; however, with Aspies it may be even more difficult given the lack of nonverbal cues. Avoid making inferences and projecting ideas onto the student, and use definitive words and language.

Self-evaluation of skills and strengths may be difficult for an Aspie. Several methods or tools (lists, tables, check-sheets, inventories) may be necessary to help the student get through this process. When using an inventory, provide clear, literal, step-by-step instructions. Meet with the student in advance to explain the instrument, how you plan to use it, and expectations for its use. Providing as much detail as possible (format, types of questions, anticipated length of time to complete) will help eliminate some anxiety.

Prepare the student to be flexible and creative when researching career options, and encourage him or her to think broadly before eliminating options. Have a conversation regarding what is literal versus what is suggested. Assign tasks (such as a pros and cons list for majors of interest) to keep the student focused and prevent him or her from being overwhelmed. Write down all instructions and assignments given to students. When suggesting specific tools or resources, go through the resources with the student—do not simply provide a list.

When suggesting students research careers through information interviews or job shadowing, be specific about who to contact. Help the student draft an introductory e-mail or practice a telephone conversation, and help the student draft questions for each contact.

To continue to reduce stress and anxiety for the student, try to make your appointments—and the process in general—routine and predictable. When necessary, review the initial goals with the student. Be specific about the action plan and what will happen next in the process.

Job and Internship Search for Asperger's Students

When reviewing resumes and letters with Aspies, explain the purpose, use, and types. Discuss each potential section in detail, using rubrics or checklists for each. Use handouts and provide many examples. If using an online tool, go through the tool with the student or provide detailed instructions.

Be mindful that there may be sensitivity or attachment to his or her work and "cutting" the resume could cause anxiety for the student. Have discussions about length and relevance of information that should be included.

Interviewing and networking may be difficult for many students with Asperger's. Some common challenges for Aspies include communication style, social interaction, dealing with nonverbals, body language and gesturing, length of responses, professional dress and grooming, sensory overload, fear of rejection, and anxiety. Try to normalize the process as much as possible through mock interviews and practice. Rehearsal and repetition may help reduce some anxiety; have the student write out answers to commonly asked questions. Review numerous potential questions to help him or her understand the meanings of questions. Find out if the student has a calming technique already in place. If not, encourage relaxation and breathing techniques. Use clear directive language when giving advice. Focus on strengths and skills (create lists, practice scenarios, or use other ways that students can answer each question). Sometimes it is helpful to assist the student in creating detailed scripts (i.e., "When you arrive to interview you say..., then you shake the interviewer's hand. Then..."). Practice varying inflection, tone, body language, facial cues, and gesturing (provide visual resources if possible). Finally, plan additional topics of conversation in advance.

Asperger's Students: Preparing for the World of Work

For many Aspies, disclosure to an employer may not be necessary. When considering disclosure, determine if the student will need accommodations; this may be the deciding factor of whether or not to disclose. Discuss pros and cons of disclosing with the student. Based on research of the organization and company culture, would it be beneficial for student to disclose?

Should the student decide to disclose, work with him or her to develop a plan for disclosure. There are resources available that cover when, why, and how to disclose a disability to an employer. This may be a sensitive issue for the student. Encourage the student to focus on his or her strengths as an employee and the limitations that may inhibit work. It will be helpful to provide advice and strategies to help ensure success once employment is obtained. It may also be helpful to involve parents or mentors in your work with Aspies. Doing so may provide further insight into the student's strengths, personality, and experiences—but keep FERPA in mind.

Guidelines for Counseling Asperger's Students

Career services' work may be labor-intensive when working with Aspies, but the payoff can be rewarding for both the professional and the student. Given the growing population of students with Asperger's on campus, career professionals work diligently to offer a more personalized and structured program. Though there are common characteristics associated with Asperger's syndrome, is it still important that each student be treated as an individual. Education and understanding are key. Career services professionals should try not "reinvent the wheel"; rather, there are a number of resources available to help in understanding Asperger's and developing strategies for working with each student. Lastly, career services professionals should avoid using phrases like "reinvent the wheel," with Aspies—this article should help them understand why.

Endnote

1 Hughes, Jennifer L. "Supporting College Students with Asperger Syndrome: Possible Strategies for Academic Advisers to Use," The Mentor, October 28, 2009. <http://dus.psu.edu/mentor/old/articles/091028jh.htm>.

Resources

1. Wolf, L., Brown, J. and Bork, G.R. Students with Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for College Personnel. Overland Park, Kansas: Autism Asperger Publishing Company, 2009.
2. Fast, Y. Employment for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome or Non-Verbal Learning Disability: Stories and Strategies. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004.
3. Burrows, E. and Wagner, S. Understanding Asperger's Syndrome: Fast Facts-A Guide for Teachers and Educators to Address the Needs of the Student. Arlington, Texas: Future Horizons, 2004.
4. Bissonnette, B. (2009) Asperger's Syndrome Workplace Survival Guide.

www.fowardmotion.info

www.aspergermanagement.com

www.asperger.net (Autism Resources)

<http://brighthub.com/mental-health/> (Autism Resources)

www.webmd.com/brain/autism/searching-for-answers/temple-grandin (interview with Temple Grandin)

<http://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/autism/resource/index.aspx>