

A Spectrum of Possibility: Tips for Professors of College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Among professors, there is a common desire to understand student behaviors and to reach out to students of diverse backgrounds, cultures, and abilities. The tips listed below come from students with autism and their professors and will benefit students with a wide variety of learning needs. When considering class size and other classroom conditions, some of these tips may be easier to apply than others; however, steps towards making the classroom more accessible can make immense differences for students with and without ASD.

Seek professional development or develop a relationship or partnership with the disability services office

Professors recommend seeking professional development opportunities and maintaining an open relationship with disability services offices for questions about access and accommodation.

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The interesting thing is, this is my 31st year at VCU and our ability to identify students like this and the kinds of support that they would have, both within the university and society as well, are significantly more. (Virginia Commonwealth University Faculty)

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Meet with students privately and early on to get to know them

Students on the autism spectrum often repeat a single concept: “Personal relationships with professors are crucial.” Meetings with faculty allow students to share strengths, support needs, and preferences. In private meetings, students can ask questions to satisfy a need for knowledge at a depth not required for the purposes of the class, thus minimizing what classmates might perceive as distracting behavior (i.e., posing multiple, seemingly irrelevant questions).

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[Instructors] would be willing to delve into information a little deeper than they would for the regular class. After class I'd talk with them and become personal with them... you talk to them and ask them their opinion on something, they're more than willing to answer it for you. (Virginia Commonwealth University Student)

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Assume learner variability

All students benefit when lessons account for variability in the learning process. Assuming diversity in processing speed, executive functioning, and the ability to understand innuendo promotes teaching styles that are clear, organized, and creative.

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Teach to a lot of different learning modalities and different kinds of emotional states and everything...you're going to cover things more thoroughly and probably with a greater richness than you would if you were just lecturing to the standard, whatever that is in your mind, classroom. (Virginia Commonwealth University Faculty)

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Sometimes things aren't what they appear

Appearances can be deceiving. Students are listening, it is assumed, when their gaze is fixed upon the speaker and when their gesticulations, such as nodding, come in accordance with lectures. Many students on the spectrum will not provide such non-verbal cues though they may participate in other repetitive motions, like pencil tapping, that are typically indicative of distraction but may have a different significance for students with ASD. Challenges with executive functioning may also look like apathy, but most students on the spectrum are eager to learn and do well in class.

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I've probably lost close to two hundred points just because I didn't know exactly when something was due, but it wasn't on the syllabus, it kind of got posted as they came out... Someone with better executive functioning skills would regularly check this website because that's where it came up...But because my executive functioning skills are atrocious, I don't do that. (William & Mary Student)

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For more information, please see our video series *A Spectrum of Possibility*: centerontransition.org/asd. This four part video series highlights experiences and advice from college students with ASD as well as parents, high school counselors, and college professors. The series was produced by Virginia Commonwealth University's Center on Transition Innovations with funding from the Virginia Department of Education.

Additional resources

Rochester Institute of Technology Spectrum Support Program tips and guides for working with college students on the spectrum: rit.edu/~w-ssp/resources.php

National Center on Universal Design for Learning: udlcenter.org