



Faculty Reference Guide for Supporting Students with Special Needs

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Neurodiversity

"Neurodiversity" is a term used to explain that people's brains function in unique ways. Variation in brain function and behavior is a natural part of the human experience.

ASD is one of several kinds of neurodiversity. Someone with ASD may experience a wide range of characteristics (a spectrum) that may impact the way they communicate, learn, experience the sensory environment, process emotions, and socialize. Students with ASD may experience higher levels of stress than other students because their challenges with social instincts may result in fear of doing or saying the wrong thing or with an inability to understand how to behave according to conventional social norms. In addition, a history associated with experiencing social-communication differences can leave a person feeling anxious, othered, and even traumatized.

How Students Experience ASD

Every student experiences ASD differently, but the following are some common observations.

- People with ASD may experience some categories as a flexible spectrum such as gender or authority roles or labels. They may appreciate clarity with titles, pronouns, and how instructors prefer to be addressed.
- Detailed focus and ability to acquire facts can be examples of autistic strengths.
- The student may be easily overstimulated by loud sounds, eye contact, visuals, and social situations.
- A student with ASD may have special interests and knowledge in some highly specific areas.
- The student may be less likely to judge others related to typical social norms.
- The student may struggle with a change in routine or beginning a new task.

- The student may struggle with communication, including staying on topic, waiting their turn to speak, knowing the volume to use when speaking, or they may be slow to speak.
- The student may have difficulty reading social cues and understanding social etiquette.
- The student may misinterpret or be unaware of non-verbal cues and/or may be unaware of the perception of others.
- The student may have sensory processing differences, meaning they may experience sound, touch, taste, smell, and visual stimuli more more or much less intensely than others do.
- Students with ASD may use stimming for self-soothing or to manage emotions. Students may fidget or repeat behaviors, speech patterns, or movement as a way of soothing themselves when stressed or to help keep themselves focused.
- Students might lose track of time and be unaware of how much time has passed.
- ASD may also impact executive functioning, so the student may lack organizational skills, may not plan ahead, may be impulsive, or have difficulty problem solving.

What you might observe in the classroom

- If overstimulated, the student may walk out of the classroom, be visibly overwhelmed, or may make noises.
- If they lack awareness of social cues, they might interrupt others or monopolize class discussions and be viewed as rude.
- If they struggle with communication, impulsivity, or problem solving, they may ask an inordinate number of questions or interrupt instructions.
- If the student has difficulty with organization or planning, they may struggle with keeping up with deadlines.
- When cold-called in class, it might take longer to process the questions and formulate an answer because they have additional stimuli to process.



Strategies to try

- Provide a set schedule with details documented in a syllabus or other written or picture document.
- Clearly explain classroom behavior expectations, including how class participation points are factored, if applicable.
- Provide clear instructions and expectations for assignments.
- Consider adding guided notes before class like a graphic organizer to help students stay focused in class.
- Ask what the student understands and what they do not understand.
- Provide clear, written communication that is concise when possible and logical to follow.
- Students with ASD often “think in pictures.” Graphic representations can be very useful.
- Explain why what you are doing matters or is important and how it will be applicable in the future.
- Provide checklists for assignments, deadlines for steps in the process of a project, intermittent check-ins, and/or review sheets. Students with ASD may need consistent reminders about upcoming assignments and deadlines.
- Try hands-on approaches to demonstrations and use three-dimensional models when possible.
- Give them clear feedback.
- For timed exams, make sure a clock is visible or permit the student to have something on their desk that helps them keep track of time.
- Presentations can be challenging, so when appropriate, permit them to present from their seat or with a comfort or fidget item to help them manage their sensory intake.
- Provide alternatives for a student to leave class early if they feel overwhelmed through a mutually agreed-upon signal.
- Encourage them to meet regularly with a tutor or mentor to go over their deadlines and responsibilities for the week.
- Provide the readings and assignments for the next class session in writing (on the board or projecting), verbally explaining the reason for the assignment, what they should look for, and how the readings and assignments will be used. Permit them to take photos of the information with their phones.
- Communicate with the student outside of class about how you may be able to help make your classroom or class comfortable for them.
- Post written assignment sheets for major assignments before discussing in class to help ease anxiety and give them a chance to prepare questions ahead of time.
- If you have behavioral concerns, clearly explain the reasons for classroom behavior expectations.
- Connect the student with a peer mentor or guide them to a resource on campus that provides peer mentors, like Colonels Mentoring Colonels and/or guide students to campus resources like the Center for Student Accessibility, the Counseling Center, the Student Success Center, etc.