**Tips for Faculty:**

**How to Support Students on the Autism Spectrum**

***“If you met one person with autism, you met one person with autism.”***

*~ Stephen Shore*

***“What would happen if the autism gene was eliminated from the gene pool? You would have a bunch of people standing around in a cave, chatting and socializing and not getting anything done.”*** *~ Temple Grandin*

**Understanding Autism**

According to the Centers for Disease Control (Baio et al., 2018) about 1 in 59 school-age children in the US are identified as being on the autism spectrum representing more than a 20-fold increase over the last 30 years. Each year, Increasing numbers of students on the autism spectrum graduate high school and go on to higher education (Grogan, 2015). While students on the autism spectrum are often ready for the intellectual rigors of college-level learning, they are at higher risk for dropping out without appropriate supports (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). By understanding and supporting the distinct needs of students on the autism spectrum, faculty in higher education can play a key role in helping them succeed in their academic life and contribute to the diverse workforce of the future.

From a neurodiversity perspective, autism represents a natural expression of variation within the human genome and is associated with many strengths (Silberman, 2015). Individuals on the autism spectrum have the right to accommodations and full inclusion (American Disabilities Act, 1990). Some unique needs of college students on the autism spectrum that instructors and academic advisors may need to understand in order to promote inclusion are:

1. **Social Relationships** – It is a myth that individuals on the autism prefer to be alone. Everybody needs a sense of belonging. Students on the autism spectrum may need more support to interpret social cues and the many unspoken social expectations of the classroom and beyond.
2. **Communication** – The non-literal aspects of communication are often the most challenging for students on the autism spectrum, including sarcasm, subtext, non-verbal cues, and other less direct forms of communication. These subtle challenges are often misunderstood or unrecognized.
3. **Perceiving, Planning and Learning** – The increased demands in college for coping with changes, independent living, time management, and self-care are challenges for all transitioning college students. These are areas of particular challenge for students on the autism spectrum who may have distinct needs in sensory processing and executive function.

**Tips for Supporting Students on the Autism Spectrum**

Faculty can support students on the autism spectrum to succeed in college and beyond through accommodation. The strategies provided here are based on the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which emphasize making courses accessible and learning attainable for *all* students regardless of learning style, physical or sensory abilities (Cast, 2011). In other words, while the strategies presented address the needs of students on the autism spectrum, they are also useful for many students at large. Faculty may receive additional specific accommodation instructions for individual students through the DPRC.

The following tips were generated by the students in the *SFSU Autism Spectrum Support Group*. Taking into account the multifarious and changing abilities and needs of each individual on the autism spectrum, there is no single method or approach that will support an individual at any given time. Thus, any guidance or accommodation that we provide must be rooted in an understanding of each individual’s unique experience.

**Increase open communication and consistency; limit unexpected changes.**

* Maintain a structure that is consistent throughout the course of the semester and provide reasonable room or accommodations for incorporating any new changes to the curriculum. For example, a clear well-organized syllabus including a calendar of assignments and due dates.
* Prepare students for participation; announce topics that will be covered, expectations for the participation, providing exam review sheets or sample papers/test questions.
* If an issue arises, address it in a courteous manner – e.g., pull the student aside; encourage the student to come to office hours or make an appointment to discuss the issue. For additional support contact the San Francisco State University Disability Programs & Resource Center at 415-338-2472 and/or Counseling & Psychological Services Center at 415-338-2208.

**Create a space for diverse ways of information processing and expression.**

* Make sure directions and questions are clear, direct and concise.
* Present information through multiple methods and modalities (for example, using illustrations, simulations, graphics, lists, models, videos, or writing in addition to verbal).
* Allow additional time for students to process directions/questions (sometimes up to 30 seconds).
* Some students may be very detail oriented and may need help seeing the bigger picture. Help students to make connections between texts, themselves, others, and the world.

**Make your expectations for communication, participation, and student conduct explicit.**

* Make explicit the expected classroom behaviors with the whole class. These may include rules for mobile phone use, attendance, eating/drinking in class, or verbal participation. Work out a class arrangement to give an equal opportunity for students to contribute to class discussion.
* Facilitate equitable in-class participation. Set a reasonable time limit for students to speak. Use agreed upon signals to alert students to a need for topic or speaker change. Provide discussion prompts in advance & assign lead discussants for different questions. Offer alternatives to face-to-face discussions.
* Provide frequent and varied assessments of performance, which allow students to know how they are doing over time and to make adjustments. Diverse assessment approaches (e.g., oral presentations, case studies, take-home exams, in-class quizzes, and papers) allow different ways to demonstrate learning.

**Create a comfortable sensory environment for learning.**

* Talk with the student and find out what makes a comfortable learning environment for them and make reasonable changes to the environment– e.g., asking the class to avoid wearing scented products or bringing pungent food to class; keeping the lights dim or using natural light; and reducing noise levels.

**Additional Resources**

Autism Spectrum Studies at San Francisco State University <http://www.sfsu.edu/~autism/>

Autistic Self Advocacy Network. (2013). *Navigating college: A handbook on self-advocacy written for autistic students from autistic adults* Washington, DC: Autistic Self Advocacy Network. Downloadable from [http://www.navigatingcollege.org/download.php.](http://www.navigatingcollege.org/download.php)

Zager, D., Alpern, C., McKeon, B., Maxam, S., & Mulvey, J. (2013). *Educating college students with autism spectrum disorders* New York: Routledge.

(See [http://ctfd.sfsu.edu/udl f](http://ctfd.sfsu.edu/udl)or more on UDL).

**References**

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-336, 104 Stat. 328 (1990.

Baio J, Wiggins L, Christensen DL, et al. (2018) Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 8 Years — Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 Sites, United States, 2014. MMWR Surveill Summ 2018;67(No. SS-6):1–23. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss6706a1>.

CAST (2011). *Universal design for learning guidelines* version 2.0. Wake­eld, MA: Author.

Grogan, G. (2015). *Supporting students with autism in Higher Education through teacher educator programs*, SRATE Journal Summer, Vol. 24, Number 2: 8 – 13.

Pinder-Amaker S (2014). *Identifying the unmet needs of college students on the autism spectrum*. Harvard Review Psychiatry. Mar-Apr; 22(2):125-37. PMID: 24614767.

Silberman, S. (2015). *Neurotribes: The legacy of autism and the future of neurodiversity*. New York: Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House.

Handout created by the SFSU Autism Spectrum Support Group