

Learning Support for Students with High Functioning Autism in  
Post-secondary Learning Communities

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Author Note

This is an article reviewing the presentation entitled *I Signed Up for This... How Do I Help? Tutoring Students with High Functioning Autism*. Presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference for the Tutoring Profession, Chicago, 2016.

### **Abstract**

*College and university academic support programs are faced with a myriad of student needs. One demographic of students having a big impact on post-secondary learning communities is those diagnosed with high functioning autism, HFA (formerly known as Asperger's Syndrome, AS). The transition from the secondary school settings of students with HFA to college and university learning communities is not seamless. Although there are legal mandates that support rights of challenged individuals to pursue placement in the workforce and further education, the language of this legislation is vague. Post-secondary settings are left with the task of interpreting how these mandates will be addressed to create supportive services responding to the needs of student's with HFA. The critical importance of development of academic support services is discussed as well as these services offering a pathway for integration of the student with HFA into the post-secondary learning community.*

## Introduction

College and university academic and learning support programs are faced with a myriad of student needs. One demographic of students having a big impact on post-secondary learning communities are those diagnosed with high functioning autism, HFA (formerly known as Asperger's Syndrome, AS). Since the original identification by Asperger in 1944 (Asperger translation, 1991), AS has been recognized as a diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Due to recent debate over whether AS should stand as a separate diagnosis or not, the most recent DSM-V (APA, 2013) now categorizes the diagnosis as high functioning autism (HFA) under the umbrella of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Regardless of the clinical definition, there is no debate about how students with an HFA diagnosis are impacting the post-secondary learning community.

Reports indicate an increase in ASD prevalence of 23% from 2006-2008 (Center for Disease Control, 2012). “[Fifty Thousand] adolescents with HFA are aging out of the educational system each year” as estimated by David Kearon, Director of Adult Services for Autism Speaks (O’Murchu, 2015). It is reasonable to anticipate greater enrollment of students with HFA in post-secondary institutions. The transition from the secondary school settings of students with HFA to college and university learning communities is not a seamless one. These students are moving from educational environments that provided individualized educational programs (IEP) and support services mandated by legislation and the provision of free and equal education through guaranteed constitutional rights either up to graduation or the age of 21 years to legislation that is

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not clear. Although there are legal mandates that support the rights of challenged individuals to pursue placement in the workforce and their further education, language of this legislation is vague. Issues of required services in college and university settings must be resolved through careful consideration of institutional mission statements as well as the legal mandates. Post-secondary settings are left with the task of interpreting how these mandates will be addressed to create supportive services addressing the needs of student's with HFA.

### **HFA, the Law, and Support Services**

HFA is distinguished from cognitive and language deficits typical of an autism diagnosis. As identified by the DSM-V (2013), predominant characteristics of HFA include significant impairment in social interactions; stereotypical patterns of behavioral; narrow areas of interest to the point of self-absorption; inflexibility of routine; awkward motor skills. Differentiation of this diagnosis on the autism spectrum recognizes no delay in language, cognitive development, self-help skills or adaptive behavior and intellectual functioning usually testing average to above average. Many students with an HFA diagnosis are academically qualified to attend college; however, participation in the rigors of a post-secondary settings are challenged by difficulties navigating social scenarios and reciprocity of conversation (Wing & Potter, 2002). These challenges should encourage students to investigate benefits in connecting to college and university support services.

As these students transition to post-secondary learning communities, they may need support that will level the playing field and maximize probability of success to capitalize on their academic talents. Legal mandates such as the Americans with

Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) and Americans with Disabilities Amendments (ADAAA, 2008) are intended to protect against discrimination to those with disabilities. Under section 504 of ADA a college or university must provide qualified students with disabilities equal access to all educational programs, services, and activities and assure provision of reasonable accommodations to individuals with disabilities. The college or university has the right to maintain their programs academic standards, integrity, and requirements of courses and programs as well as conduct codes (Section 504, 1973). Although these mandates exist, no guidelines are given for specific services and expected accommodations that should be provided at the post-secondary level (Smith, 2007). Colleges and universities must be prepared to assist the student with HFA with appropriate resources and support in order that his or her unique contributions can be nurtured and realized. Post-secondary settings need to determine how this is to be addressed through mission statements of their institutions as well as defining the mission(s) of their support services.

### **Impact on Learning Support Programs**

Learning support programs will be faced with varying levels of challenge. They will need to be aware of social challenges that may impact individual relationships as well as group dynamics that will manifest itself with difficulty interacting with peers and faculty (Wiatr, 2016). The challenge of effective tutoring and group support settings is critical for successful transition to post-secondary settings. The social deficit of an HFA diagnosis executive function, another part of the diagnosis, will likely witness problems with planning, cognitive flexibility, and working memory (Wiatr, 2016). Additionally, there may be comorbid issues that exist with an HFA diagnosis. A range of challenges that

include sensitivity to environments (i.e. lighting, noise level, smells), difficulty regulating attention, and psychological problems (i.e. depression, anxiety) affect participation in learning support (Wiatr, 2016). Learning support will need to develop systems of inquiry that may provide insight to the challenges to learning each individual brings to tutoring and study groups, in order to prepare the professional and para-professional staff delivering services. Training of the staff needs to incorporate not only raising awareness about HFA and assisting those students but also helping staff recognize that they are only one component of a broad range of support and services the student with HFA needs to utilize on campus. It is easy to become so connected to a student that the tutor or group leader creates a feeling of dependence for that student. Professional boundaries need to be established but maintaining a focus on the academic support offered through learning support centers will help define the focus of support tools (Wolf et.al., 2009).

Whether dealing with individual, (i.e. one-to-one tutoring, mentoring) or group formats (i.e. guided study skills groups, test review) part of the ongoing training for service providers needs to sensitize staff to their potential to help the student with HFA connect to the post-secondary learning community. Tutors, group leaders, and mentors need to understand that they may be the best resource for the student with HFA to connect cognitively with class content. They may have an impact on how the student meets organizational demands of a course. These service providers may also be the first to witness frustration and difficulties a student with HFA has when connecting with their peer group or appropriately interacting with faculty. Maintaining an academic focus

will guide both the provision of services and the need for outreach to the broader learning community.

### **Individual and Group Tutoring Tips**

When addressing challenges of HFA, service providers must start with the big picture then fine tune it as needs are identified. Each individual will bring strengths and weaknesses to the support format. Developing services that best address specific needs will evolve with the relationship that is built into the campus support structure. In general, however, there are tips that can be used to assess needs of the student with HFA are useful other individual or small group scenarios. Structuring a successful tutoring or study group session is key to effective delivery of services regardless of the complement of students.

One-on-one tutoring should quickly reveal needs of the tutee with an HFA diagnosis. Everything from time management, organization skills, and course content comprehension will present quickly. A student might make an appointment and show up 15 minutes late still expecting to be seen for a full 30 minute appointment. Materials requested for review may be partial, disorganized, or missing all together. Probing for difficulties with content may result in generic laments that nothing is understood or the instructor does not know what they are talking about. Establishing the structure in which the student is expected to function is needed and will provide familiarity with the tutoring setting.

Familiarity with routine and established expectations will reduce anxiety and possible avoidance issues that can disrupt tutoring support. Some suggestions to establish a tutoring routine include:

- Setting a standing appointment that can be written into a calendar or electronic tool the student uses is desirable.
- Establishing a semester plan clearly identifying expectations and commitment to the tutoring schedule is important.
- Checklists provided ahead of the appointment or completed during an initial appointment, can be used to identify academic strengths and weaknesses and problem areas (Wolf, et.al, 2009).
- Becoming familiar with learning style establishes consistency and can effectively tap academic strengths.
- Defining possible inconsistency in established routines will also help the student cope with possible cancelations or alternate people with whom they may encounter in the course of the term.

Strategies for individual tutoring sessions are also applicable to the small study group venue, but group dynamics must also be considered.

Participation in a study group may look different for a student with HFA but can be as beneficial as tutoring. The very nature of a group brings with it a diversity of cognitive styles and academic abilities and marks the departure from tutoring sessions being crafted to the individual. Students with HFA will need to determine if the study group format will work for them. Keep in mind that some strategies that address needs of a student with HFA can be beneficial to the group at large. Here are some suggestions for study groups:

- Identify group meeting times and dates, just as with tutoring sessions, for group study meetings and submit them to a semester plan.
- Determine clear objectives for the group sessions and establish an outline of engagement and participation.
- Depending on how course content might drive review of material, consider different ways of reviewing material (i.e. if material is straight lecture use outlines and mind mapping to reorganize material; if material is outlined, use question-and-answer or discussion to give substance to concepts).
- Identify and get to know the individual with HFA and informally monitor their participation in the group.
- Give students feedback. To enrich the process, be open to questions and ideas from the group that would help the group process.

Reflecting on these suggestions may underscore strategies that could be incorporated into effective study group planning. Awareness and training for professional and para-professional staff of college and university academic and learning support centers is important in order to allow them to best aid all students.

## **Discussion**

The job of academic and support services reaches beyond facilitating successful completion of courses for the student with HFA. It provides part of the pathway for integration of the student with HFA into the post-secondary learning community. Successful completion of degree and certification programs at post-secondary levels will allow people with HFA to reach their potential and become contributing members of society. For students either with or without challenges learning support is often a critical component to the successful completion of post-secondary programs. Supporting

people with learning challenges through individual and small group encounters also provides a gateway to experience the diversity that surrounds us and opportunity to embrace development of an inclusive society.

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