Exploratory Advising: Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Cora Dzubak, Margaret Mbindyo, and Nicole Hastings

Millersville University of PA

Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 many colleges and universities continue to report an increase in the number of students identified with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Working with ASD students requires an individualized approach because their career interests are often narrow and they can be reluctant to explore alternative majors and career options. A traditional career decision making model is sometimes not effective with students who are intent on pursuing a specific major with little interest in exploration. Advisees with ASD can hesitate to explore options that allow them to maximize their academic and career strengths while also minimizing personal, behavioral, or communication characteristics that are not conducive to success in their chosen career (Bissonnette, 2016; Dzubak, 2011). One challenge for advisers is to recognize students with ASD and to assist them in their efforts to identify a major that is compatible with their interests, academic strengths, interpersonal skills, and eventually provide them with a transferable career skill set. Often their interpersonal and social competency skills require as much consideration as choice of major or career.

Cora Dzubak, Ph.D., is an Advisement Coordinator for the Exploratory Studies Program at Millersville University of Pennsylvania. Contact: Cora.Dzubak@millersville.edu

Margaret Mbindyo, Ed.D., is an Advisement Coordinator for the Exploratory Studies Program at Millersville University of Pennsylvania. Contact: margaret.mbindyo@millersville.edu

Nicole Hastings, MA, is an Advisement Coordinator for the Exploratory Studies Program at Millersville University of Pennsylvania. Contact: Nicole.Hastings@millersville.edu

Introduction

There are at least five areas with which an adviser of exploratory or undeclared students with ASD should be familiar. These include being able to 1) recognize of the individual characteristics of the student and especially their social, communication, and behavioral skill set, 2) understand the cognitive characteristics of ASD that impact decision making and problem solving, 3) acquire an awareness of the personal characteristics such as perseveration, repetitive rituals, or anxiety that can impact academic and career progress, 4) identify the sometimes predetermined interests that restrict desire and ability to explore alternative majors and careers and, 5) recognize the particular strengths of students with ASD that are most highly marketable to prospective employers.

ASD and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, fifth edition (DSM-5) was published on May 18, 2013, superseding the DSM -IV-TR. The DSM-5 removed all the previously recognized diagnostic differences between Asperger Syndrome and Autism, and left one diagnosis: Autism Spectrum Disorder (TACA, 2011). What follows is the criteria for the current diagnosis of ASD. All four of these criteria must be met in order to receive a formal psychiatric diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder:

A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across contexts, not accounted for by general developmental delays, and manifest by all three of the following:

   1.   Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity; ranging from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back and forth conversation through reduced sharing of interests, emotions, and affect and response to total lack of initiation of social interaction

> 2.   *Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction; ranging from poorly integrated- verbal and nonverbal communication, through abnormalities in eye contact and body-language, or deficits in understanding and use of nonverbal communication, to total lack of facial expression or gestures*
>
> 3.   *Deficits in developing and maintaining relationships, appropriate to developmental level (beyond those with caregivers); ranging from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit different social contexts through difficulties in sharing imaginative play* and in making friends to an apparent absence of interest in people

B.   Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities as manifested by at least two of the following:

> 1.   *Stereotyped or repetitive speech, motor movements, or use of objects; (such as simple motor stereotypies, echolalia, repetitive use of objects, or idiosyncratic phrases).*
>
> 2.   *Excessive adherence to routines, ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior, or excessive resistance to change; (such as motoric rituals, insistence on same route or food, repetitive questioning or extreme distress at small changes)*
>
> 3.   *Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus; (such as strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests)*
>
> 4.   *Hyper-or hypo-reactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of environment; (such as apparent indifference to pain/heat/cold, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, fascination with lights or spinning objects).*

C.   Symptoms must be present in early childhood (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities).

D.   Symptoms together limit and impair everyday functioning.

There are also three Severity Levels for ASD:

> *Level 3: Requiring very substantial support*
>
> Level 2: Requiring substantial support

Level 1: Requiring support

Without supports in place, deficits in social communication cause noticeable impairments. Has difficulty initiating social interactions and demonstrates clear examples of atypical or unsuccessful responses to social overtures of others. May appear to have decreased interest in social interactions.

*Rituals and repetitive behaviors (RRB's) cause significant interference with functioning in   one or more contexts. Resists attempts by others to interrupt RRB's or to be redirected from fixated interest. (*American Psychiatric Association, DSM – 5, 2013).

Dipeolu, Storlie, & Johnson (2015) noted that college students with a well-established diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome are generally identified as having Level 1 ASD (APA, 2013). The reason the above diagnostic information is included here is to remind the reader that the criteria in the DSM – 5 kept many individuals from being assigned an ASD diagnosis who might have received it under the previous DSM - IV-TR criteria. Because individuals with ASD often do not display cognitive deficits and are typically of high cognitive functioning, many meet college entrance requirements despite other challenges that can impact their adjustment and progress. There are students who appear to demonstrate mild symptomatology of what was previously diagnosed as Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism who are not severe enough to receive a diagnosis of ASD, Level 1. Advisers will be better prepared to work with advisees, whether or not they are formally diagnosed with ASD, if familiar with the current DSM-5 criteria.

The remainder of this paper examines the issues and symptomatology of exploratory students who demonstrate characteristics of what were once labeled as Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism (HFA), whether or not they have a formal diagnosis of ASD, with the intent to provide them with informed academic and

career advisement. Melton (2012) reminded advising professionals that characteristics such as low self-esteem and learned helplessness can easily develop in this group of students. Therefore, it is important for advising and career services professionals to understand how the ASD related characteristics can affect advisees and impact their choice of major and career planning.

Prevalence and Employment Data

It is estimated that approximately nine to twelve percent of students attending postsecondary institutions are identified as having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2011), only 17.8% of adults with a disability are employed, as compared with 63.6% of people without a disability (Mynatt, Gibbons, & Hughes, 2014). Of those graduates with ASD, approximately six to twelve percent work full time, despite being of average or above average intelligence and possessing a college degree. Well informed advising professionals can help to ease the transition of persons with disabilities into the workforce. For students with ASD, an individualized and comprehensive approach to selection of major and informed career choice can greatly enhance the likelihood of successful transition to the workforce.

During the past decade, assumptions were made as to why there was such an increase in the number of students with Asperger Syndrome or ASD. Some explanations included: greater recognition of the symptomatology, increased access to resources, improved diagnostics and labeling, and a higher prevalence of

ASD/Asperger/High Functioning Autism in the general population. Melton (2012) noted that despite the increase in prevalence, there has been little training available for advising and career services professionals for working with this student population, noting that "much of the ASD research focused on younger children, not the college student population with which career services works on a daily basis" (p 4). Advising and career professionals would benefit from increased training opportunities specific to this population of students.

Meaningful employment tends to improve the quality of life of anyone, but particularly persons with disabilities, as it adds long term purpose and reward. Persons with ASD are more apt to work part time, and also less likely to be employed in a management or professional role. Despite possessing the required skill set for a particular role, the individual's difficulty interpreting situational context, such as knowing what to say or do, what tone to use when speaking, or how to react in an unfamiliar situation sometimes compromises or masks the actual job-related skill set (Bissonnette, 2013). In a case study Hurlburt (2004) found that "For the most part, they had not been able to obtain jobs in the fields they had been trained in, and each had lost many jobs in the past" (p. 218). These are realities that advisers can help them address and prepare for before students graduate, particularly via engagement in volunteer experiences, shadowing, or internships.

Characteristics and Challenges

According to Mynatt, et al (2014) students diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, HFA, or ASD - like characteristics often face complex symptomology such as difficulty with social skills, narrowed interests, sensory related sensitivities, and lack of self-awareness that may affect their ability to successfully enter the workforce. Bissonnette (2016) noted that college students with ASD sometimes demonstrate repetitive movements or patterns of behavior that can interfere with their work performance or their interactions with colleagues. Additional challenges can include unique language patterns or responding appropriately to the nonverbal behaviors of others. Executive functioning problems associated with working memory will result in difficulties with multitasking and decision making, whether in college classes or on the job. Mynatt et al (2014) noted that "individuals with Asperger's Syndrome often develop average language skills but may not be able to navigate the social nuances; ie; following conversations or changes in conversations, maintaining eye contact, or sharing of information, whether too much or too little" (p. 186). Rudy (2017) noted that areas of executive functioning such as planning, organizing, and dealing with change often complicate both school and work related performance.

These types of interpersonal characteristics can complicate successful transition into the workforce even when the individual demonstrates a strong job-related skill set. Dzubak (2011) noted **"**as high school students, many received individualized instruction intended to teach them the skills needed to interact with others in a variety of settings; the classroom, home, work, and community. Yet problems sometimes persist into adulthood with interpersonal skill acquisition and work performance. Lapses in social

skill performance inevitably result in a generalized awkwardness during interactions and sometimes include inappropriate verbal responses. Such occurrences are not only socially awkward, but more important, they interfere with communication, interpersonal interactions, and even job performance" (p2). Unique or repetitive behaviors often increase the anxiety that people with ASD feel during interactions, thereby exacerbating difficulties during social activities on campus or in the workplace. Repetitive behaviors interfere with the performance of learned skills. The more frequent and severe the competing behaviors, the more they interfere with the appropriate demonstration of desired social and work-related skills. This in turn disrupts the individual's ability to be effectively engaged in social, academic, or work-related activities.

Encouraging students with ASD to participate in activities with which they are not familiar is often complicated by their increased levels of generalized anxiety. Given the escalated anxiety, the student might prefer to avoid engaging in any situation in which they anticipate discomfort, even when recognizing that the activity can prove beneficial to their academic and/or career progress. Interpersonal and communication issues such as interpreting nonverbal cues, or recognizing empathy, or even interactions that involve use of humor can be awkward (Mynatt, 2014). ASD often affects the ability to understand the feelings of others, which impacts not only social interactions, but potentially choice of major and eventually choice of a career. Dipeolu, et al (2015) noted that skills related to social interaction warrant the provision of social skill sets and accommodations just like academic accommodations that exist in higher education setting. Many students with ASD are very much aware that their reactions are

sometimes awkward or unusual, whereas other students seem unaware of their idiosyncrasies.The lack of self-awareness tends to complicate many situations, whether social, academic or career.

A tendency to focus on details can be an academic and career strength, especially when a major or a career requires orientation to detail, or one that involves specifics in terms of numbers, measurement, patterns, or analytics. However, the ability to focus on details can be problematic if the focus is on the wrong details; that is, details that are not significant to the particular task at hand. Students with ASD generally perform best if they can focus on one detail and task at a time. A career that requires accuracy over speed, which provides clear guidelines in the pursuit of specific goals, and /or, that quantifies the job task or one's performance is often more compatible with the interests and skill set of those with ASD than positions without clearly defined performance measures or goals.

In order to broaden their knowledge and experiential base, most students benefit from being encouraged to consider work related options with which they have limited experience, to go beyond their current comfort level, and to challenge themselves to engage in new opportunities. For a student with ASD, these types of challenges often lead to increased anxiety, which in turn can exacerbate routines or any behavioral rituals in which they tend to engage when experiencing discomfort (Melton, 2012). Their preference for familiarity, routine, and predictability often results in resistance to change and reluctance to step outside their immediate comfort zone (Hurlburt, 2007).

Problem Solving and Decision Making

Anxiety, perseveration, and narrowed interests often complicate the process of effective problem solving and career decision making. Too many specific academic or job-related details can become overwhelming to persons with ASD. To complicate the matter, students with ASD sometimes cannot determine whether their solution to a specific problematic situation is satisfactory, as they might struggle with whether another solution could lead to better results Melton (2012). Despite these issues, choice of major and career exploration can initially be approached as with any other student. However, advisees with ASD might benefit from more time with the adviser, or more concrete explanations of things that are abstract or theoretical. Providing real life examples and associating these examples with academic and career decisions can be especially beneficial. When in doubt, an adviser can ask the student to summarize what was discussed, thereby providing valuable feedback and evidence of their understanding.

Channon, Charman, Heap, Crawford, & Rios, P. (2001) suggested that whereas the process of problem solving and decision making could be difficult for students with ASD, they were more successful at evaluating a list of options and potential solutions that could be useful to them. Self-generating a list of viable options proved to be more difficult than evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of individual options that were provided to them. Advisers might choose to take a more active and direct role in the process of helping a student choose a major or to select which internships to apply to. On the other hand, caution should be paid to monitoring that the student is actively involved in this process of selection of major and subsequent career path. At no time do

those decisions become the sole responsibility of the adviser, but sometimes it requires

extra encouragement and support before a student with ASD will consider actively

engaging in exploratory activities with which they are not familiar.

The Process of Exploration

Studies show that adults with a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome who do have

jobs often hold positions that do not match their abilities, and that there are a variety of

reason for this. (Barnhill, 2007).   Individuals with ASD have a tendency to be hyper

focused combined with narrow interests, and even casual conversations can become

dominated by their individualized interests and topics (Mynatt et al, 2014). From an

adviser's perspective, narrow interests might appear to be advantageous in that

exploration is more focused, but the narrow interests can result in a reluctance to

investigate other viable major and career alternatives. Advisers must be prepared to

match advisee interests, skill sets, interpersonal characteristics, and career strengths as

they relate to their choice of major and career goal. A narrow range of interests often

leads to a reluctance to step beyond areas in which they are experienced into an area

with which there is a lack of familiarity. However, career exploration is strengthened by

increased exposure to viable career related activities that might involve volunteering,

shadowing, or an internship.

Students with ASD will benefit from recognizing situations that exacerbate their

anxiety, and develop coping strategies when they anticipate or feel discomfort. An

adviser can assist the student in identifying situations in which they become anxious

and encourage the student to learn and practice coping strategies to minimize the

symptoms. If anxiety interferes extensively with coping skills, a referral for professional counseling might be recommended in an effort to strengthen the interpersonal skill set and coping skills needed for the workplace.

Advisees with ASD demonstrate a broad array of career goals based on their individual strengths, interests, and experiences.Their strengths often include pattern recognition, focus, sustained concentration, attention to detail, and a high level of intelligence. Individual behavioral characteristics that transfer effectively to the workplace generally include commitment to the job, dependability, and a low absentee rate (Bissonnette, 2016). Many students demonstrate a strong desire to learn and to acquire new skills, providing them with an advantage in fields that tend to change quickly, especially in terms of technology. These fields can include computer technology, biotechnology, scientific research, engineering, and detailed oriented fields such as technical writing or documentation (Bissonnette 2013).

Bissonnette (2016) cautioned against placing too much emphasis solely on students' expressed interests, as that can lead to an unsuitable career choice. Because of individual uniqueness and ASD related characteristics, commonly used interest surveys and career assessments are generally not as effective as intended with this group of students. Once a job is secured, Hurlburt (2004) recommended matching employees with ASD with supportive colleagues in the workplace. An important function of the colleagues is to ensure that "job duties, responsibilities, expectations, and rules be clearly described ahead of time" (p. 220), thereby minimizing situations that cause stress and anxiety.

Bissonnette (2016) described persons with ASD as being "bottom up processors" (p.37), focusing first on details, facts, and specific events, followed by a methodical approach to working upward towards the bigger picture. Neurotypicals on the other hand are often top down processors, preferring to initially focus on the larger picture, or the main idea, and then proceeding downward to the details. The bottom up approach preferred by many persons with ASD allows them to acquire large amounts of institutional details and knowledge (Bissonnette, 2016). Since many individuals with ASD are literal, concrete, and tend to focus on details, the planning of a large project, setting the priorities, or multitasking can be challenging for them, yet their skills can complement those of neurotypicals (Bissonnette, 2013). Focusing on their strengths rather than on their limitations will greatly increase the likelihood of career success.

A Holistic Approach to Exploration

When advising students with ASD a holistic perspective is recommended. This perspective considers the whole person and places equal attention on the academic, social, and career aspects of an individual's activities and functioning. Identifying personal strengths and interests, in what type of work environment, and an awareness of the office climate all interact and directly impact employee behaviors and success

Demonstrating an interest in something such as a college major or a specific career implies that there has been a previous positive experience or that there are current positive expectations associated with that interest. Awareness of advisee specific interests, expectations, and experiences is important as they consider selection of major. Broadening a student's interests might require more than the usual amount of time spent online researching the college's majors, minors, and related careers.

Completion of career and interest surveys can be an effective strategy for exploratory

students. Joining a club related to one's major, such as a Business club, Tech club, or a

Biology club also helps to increase awareness of career options. Volunteer work, paid

work, or an internship also add to the student's real-life work-related knowledge so that

they can make decisions based on their own experiences. An employment opportunity

that matches the person's preferred job interest tends to fulfill their psychological needs,

leading to higher intrinsic motivation, confidence, and job satisfaction (Lorentz, et al,

2014). This is an important but sometimes overlooked principle. Bissonnette (2016)

recommended that an effort should be made to educate businesses and employers

about what persons with ASD can bring to the work force. One key to career success is

to focus specifically on strengths and what skills the individual can contribute to the

work setting. If an employee with ASD possesses the necessary skill set for a specific

position, then a mentor or supportive colleague might be of great value in teaching the

expected interpersonal or office behaviors that increase the likelihood of work place

adjustment.

The Value of Planning the Transition to Work

Not every person with ASD needs to disclose their disability. Melton (2012)

recommends that the pros and cons of disclosure of disability should be discussed with

the student. Should the student decide to disclose, support the advisee in developing a

plan for disclosure; that is, when, how and to whom. Disclosure of a disability is

generally a sensitive issue for any student, but it can be accomplished with a focus on

their individual career related strengths. It will be beneficial to provide periodic guidance

and effective work based strategies to help ensure success once employment is obtained. When possible, frequent mentoring and support is recommended early in the job before problematic issues arise. Support and recommendations might be needed that are specific to the skill set associated with the position and/or in interpersonal or professional interactions. Too often the employee with ASD loses a position due to behavioral idiosyncrasies related to ASD rather than due to the lack of the skills needed to fulfill job expectations.

Dipeolu, et al (2015) noted that with careful transition planning, college students with ASD will be better prepared to advocate for themselves both in college and in the workplace. The active involvement of academic advisers and career counselors is crucial in minimizing the anxiety associated with the transition to work. Practicing the skills needed for a smoother transition to the workplace can be started within the college setting. Anticipating and recognizing potential anxiety inducing situations can lead to a decision to provide on the job behavioral mentoring and/or modeling of interpersonal and team related skills. Recognizing what triggers an individual's anxiety is necessary in order to reduce the stress related behaviors. When employers and colleagues are aware of the triggers, they can attempt to minimize their impact by supporting the person with ASD and focusing on personal and work related strengths.

Students with ASD can be mentored and will learn to recognize and interpret the nuances of body language, facial expressions, gestures and interpersonal interactions that occur most commonly in the work place. With familiarization and practice, interpersonal confidence and self-efficacy both increase, smoothing the transition to the

world of work. Channon, et al (2001) noted that "Multiple processes involving both cognitive abilities and life experiences contribute to everyday problem-solving" (p.461). There are differences between generating and discussing solutions to potential problems and the transfer of these solutions into the work place. This supports the recommendation that increased exposure and experience in both social and work-related activities will supplement the individual's repertoire of work related skills while reducing work related anxiety.

Summary and Recommendations

Students with ASD often demonstrate subtle nuances related to ASD including social and language difficulties. Starting interventions when students are young and providing enriching interpersonal and social experiences begin to build the skill sets needed for school and eventually the world of work. Any strengthening of social, language, and interpersonal skills will be advantageous in the future, regardless of place of employment. From preschool through high school, the more community and interpersonal experiences, the more confident the student with ASD will become.

It is important to practice a holistic perspective of advising and career service delivery. A diagnosis of ASD does not define the student or his/her future. Advisers and other professionals will benefit from a focus on the entire student, which includes their individual cognitive, social, language, and physical domains, and across multiple settings. These settings can include academic, community, and workplace venues. It is important to consider the multiple roles in which students are and will be engaged. Focusing on strengths and potential, but not ignoring areas of weakness or challenge, will be productive. To reinforce successes and growth and assist in identifying and

strengthening areas of need will help them develop confidence. Lack of success in the job place is often associated with interpersonal variables even when there is a strong skill set needed for satisfactory work performance. One of the greatest challenges when advising students with ASD is recognizing how their strengths as well as their idiosyncratic behaviors will combine and interact in the specific position for which they are hired.

Discussing individual problem-solving styles, interpersonal skills, nonverbal behaviors, or personalized rituals is helpful, but often not sufficient, when advising students with ASD as they prepare for internships or job interviews. A student will benefit significantly from participation in role play and use of video taping of self while practicing social interactions, or during mock interviews. It is often during the video viewing of self that one becomes most aware of habits, mannerisms, or nervous tics. It is through gaining self-awareness that one can begin to minimize or eliminate the mannerisms and habits that might interfere with performance in the workplace. Observing an adviser or another student modeling appropriate behaviors such as a greeting, or participating in a mock team meeting can be integrated into role play scenarios.

Participation in class related activities, clubs, job fairs, or community service will provide multiple opportunities for students with ASD to strengthen their social skills and build their confidence in settings that require spontaneity during interpersonal activities. Another advantage of engagement in these activities is the opportunity to broaden student awareness of career options, whether or not they are related to their expressed choice of major or career. Job shadowing is an effective way for a student to become

familiar with more career options and career expectations. All of the above can provide

useful information, whether the student is choosing a major or considering a specific

career. What is known is that students with ASD often bring a strong set of skills to the

employer who will then benefit from being encouraged to focus on employee strengths

and the skill set they bring to the job. Individualized support, guidance, encouragement,

and mentoring will all increase the likelihood that the student with ASD will become a

successful and valued employee.

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