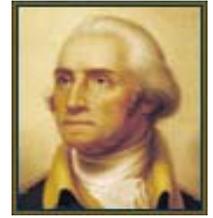


# GW HEATH Resource Center

## *Understanding College Students With Autism*

By Dawn Prince-Hughes, Ph.D.



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*HEATH frequently prints stories and testimonials from students and professionals with disabilities to inspire other students with disabilities and to inform the work of professionals and faculty who work with them. Dawn Prince-Hughes embodies both realms: she has Asperger's syndrome, an autism-spectrum disorder, and is an adjunct professor of anthropology at Western Washington University. The following excerpts appear here with the author's permission. The complete article can be found in *Aquamarine Blue 5: Personal Stories of College Students With Autism* (Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 2002, [www.ohiou.edu/oup/press/aquamarine.htm](http://www.ohiou.edu/oup/press/aquamarine.htm), 152 pp., 0-8040-1054-4, \$14.95), which she edited.*

What would make a college student rock back and forth vigorously in an anthropology lecture, staring off into space, seemingly unaware of the discomfort of those around her? What would make a student bring a map of Hawaii to physics class every day, to place it carefully before him and study it intently? What would make a student get up from her library chair every five minutes and twirl in a clockwise direction three times, only to sit down calmly again? Why would a student ask a professor in a very loud voice the same question seven times in a row? Or take several weeks to complete a simple, two-page English assignment?

One might believe that students engaging in such behaviors are exhibiting signs of inattention, apathy, boredom, or worse: drug abuse, a rebellious nature, or perhaps a dangerous mental illness, leaving them completely out of touch and

without any real connection to the society around them. The above descriptions, however, apply to college students with autism or disorders along its spectrum; students who, contrary to popular misconceptions, care deeply about connection; students for whom intellectual activity and a place in academe are indispensable lifelines that give them the relationships they need while providing an outlet for their unique intelligence.

As autistic students, our internal needs and motivations are often at odds with the physical environment and many of the social and emotional demands of a college. Behaviors that are “normal” to us (talking long and enthusiastically about our special areas of interest, disregarding personal appearance and sometimes hygiene, speaking plainly rather than censoring our thoughts) and our coping mechanisms (small rituals, a need for continuous clarification, an attachment to comfort objects) make us stand out as odd and sometimes unwelcome. As promising students with special needs, we are often pushed from the one place that can maximize our potential and give our lives meaning.

Most people, whether on campus or not, have beliefs about autism that are narrow at best. People tend to picture classic autism, or Kanner's syndrome – which has diagnostic criteria that include extremely impaired social interaction and highly repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. Yet it has become clear since Kanner published on autism that the syndrome falls along a spectrum, classic autism being the most immediately identifiable,

shading off into clinical pictures that are very difficult for people to notice in brief encounters.

It is these relatively “invisible” autistic people who, by dint of their intellectual prowess, are most likely to find their way to a college and then to be misunderstood as students who are detriments to academe’s goals: producing uniform scholars who learn well within a particular instructional range, freeing professors to engage in research which in turn brings the academy revenue and prestige. While many are familiar with a type of professor often caricatured – absent-minded, eccentric, lacking in social skills, unquestionably brilliant – high-functioning autistic students with those characteristics are not recognized in academe, even though the characteristics of high-functioning autism in children have been dubbed the “Little Professor Syndrome.”

That invisibility is certainly not because such “little professors,” now turned older students, don't exist. Although many people think of the term “autistic university student” as an oxymoron, there is evidence that a potentially significant number of students in college fall on the autism spectrum. However, many brilliant students find college to be a formidable mixture of overwhelming sights and sounds, full of change and disruption. They quit, never to return, and a vast resource of intellect and unique insight is thus lost.

Often people are not even diagnosed as having autism until adulthood. Most high-functioning autistic people, not knowing what is “wrong” with them, develop a lifetime pattern of using their intelligence to find ways to appear normal. The effectiveness of this strategy seems to improve with age. However, all of the autistic people I know (including myself) report that this strategy is not perfect and never hides our uniqueness completely. Like others who seek to be what they are not, we invariably end up with painful memories at best and self-loathing at worst. We push our memories aside as we grow older. Our parents may do the same. This is an unfortunate

reality, because accurate memories of an autistic person’s childhood and the histories of our symptoms are the very key to an accurate diagnosis.

It is only recently that autism-spectrum disorders have begun to be more widely known not only to autistic people themselves and the professionals who diagnose and treat such problems, but also to those who provide services to the disabled, such as the counselors, advisers, professors, administrators, and other workers in disabled-student services at colleges and universities. It is of great importance that they begin to understand some of the common challenges for autistic students, including:

**Misdiagnosis.** People with autism are often thought to have other disorders, like Tourette’s syndrome, epilepsy, obsessive-compulsive disorders, generalized anxiety disorders, and anorexia. College counselors should learn about autism and its manifestations, as a correct diagnosis profoundly affects approaches to treatment.

**Psychological counseling.** Counselors should be aware that talk therapy does not work for the treatment of autism. They should focus on helping autistic students cope with life as they are and not on changing the autistic person. Also, medications should be tested at low doses, as autistic people are often sensitive to them.

**Academic advising.** Advisers should keep a student's potential limitations in mind. Autistic students may not be able to cope with a full course load and may also need breaks lasting a full quarter or semester. A secondary issue, autistic students’ frequent reluctance to study subjects outside their areas of special interest, can be remedied by finding classes that link different subjects together. Also, an adviser should help the student give early consideration to his or her career goals.

**Career counseling.** Autistic students need to learn the basics: how to fill out an application and

write a cover letter, how to dress for and what to do in an interview.

**Learning styles.** Students may have scattered abilities. Early testing can help students, faculty members, and advisers determine the best educational approach for the student. Some students will need tutors in their weak areas. Other students learn better moving from complex to simple problems rather than vice versa.

**Testing.** Students might need more time to finish tests or to be left alone in a separate room during the exam. Instructions should be very clear and may need to be repeated. If sample quizzes are given, they should be identical in organization to the actual test. Extra time should be allowed for projects, as autistic students will often get “hooked” on them. They may need help narrowing topics and organizing information.

**Need for sameness.** Students may need to sit in the same place in class each day, or to carry “odd” objects to class and around campus with them. This is a way to feel anchored and should not be discouraged. Also, changing classes may be very difficult for students with autism. The use of a personal guide, or taping a campus map to the back of a notebook, are possible solutions. Advisers may consider helping the student choose classes that are held in the same room or in the same building.

**Housing.** Most autistic students find it difficult, if not impossible, to live with others. Dorm living may work if the student has a private room, but rentals with roommates are usually not an option. Some students do better if they can continue to live with parents. People diagnosed with autism are eligible for social services, including housing assistance and Social Security payments that can help with rent.

**Diversity issues.** It is easy to forget that autistic people come from different ethnic groups, struggle with gender issues, and have different sexual orientations. Those realities further accent the struggles of autistic students. Diversity

counselors and liaisons should learn about autism and consider it in their workshops and outreach efforts.

**Face recognition.** Many autistic people have problems recognizing faces, even those of people they have met many times. Students may not be able to distinguish a professor from a classmate. Sometimes the problem is only contextual, but for some students, it is a constant challenge. In class, nametags can help; outside of class, people approaching the autistic student should let the student know who they are and where they have met before.

**“Disruptive” behavior.** Rocking, coughing, and grimacing are examples of the many tic behaviors that autistic people use in order to calm down and focus. Often such behaviors distract or irritate classmates, and professors may interpret such actions as signs that a student is not paying attention when quite the opposite is true. It should be explained to everyone affected that the autistic student must do what he or she does to be able to focus.

**Sensory problems.** Many autistic people need to wear baggy, cotton clothing, giving them a rumpled appearance. Trying to encourage them to wear better-fitting clothing is a mistake; if they are uncomfortable in their clothes, they will be unable to concentrate. Many autistic people also have trouble screening out background noise and can't listen and take notes at the same time. Faculty members should insist on quiet during lectures and provide handouts with notes on the lecture.

Cutting down on the general stimulation level of the room – the lights and noise – can also help. Because some autistic students are very sensitive to odors, professors should also ask other students in the class to avoid using cologne and perfume. In addition, some autistic people are picky eaters due to their sensitivities to the flavor or texture of particular foods. Students will often eat one item almost exclusively, so the cafeteria should stock plenty of it.

The world has long delighted in celebrating strange but gifted people and incorporating them into popular culture; however, when confronted with these odd, brilliant people in life, society finds it difficult to cope with them. Yet many studies have linked eccentricity, unusual focusing capabilities, speech oddities in prosody and self-reference, impulsiveness, unpretentiousness, arrogance, unsociability, insatiable curiosity, and a disregard for standard ways of behaving and thinking with intelligence, creativity, and divergent problem solving. Those characteristics are present in people who are autistic.

That is not to say that eccentricity, brilliance, and autism are one and the same. Rather, these features are often juxtaposed. The results of these juxtapositions present opportunities for individuals, their colleges, and their communities to see things in completely new ways. Indeed, autistic students and scholars may contribute revolutionary developments within their fields for the enrichment of humanity.



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