

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Postsecondary Students with Asperger Syndrome:

Considerations and Accommodations

A Thesis Submitted to the

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

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Department of

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By

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ABSTRACT:

People with Asperger Syndrome have doubted their ability to further their education at the university level.. Through much research, it is learned that this is simply not the case. First, there is an explanation of exactly what Asperger Syndrome is and then the difficulty for those with Asperger's who decide to attend a postsecondary institution. This explanation is followed with tips for both the student and faculty alike. Through this information it should be clear to readers that it is not only an option for people with Asperger Syndrome to continue their education, but by taking a few extra steps, their college career can be just as successful as others at the university.

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Running head: CAPSTONE ESSAY

Postsecondary Students with Asperger Syndrome:
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Northern Illinois University
Carrie Erhart

Asperger Syndrome: Characteristics and Classification

"My name is Chris Mitchell. I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome in 1998, while studying at the University of Teesside, UK. It was during the second year of my degree, in Media Studies, when I became very isolated and depressed that I found out I may have Asperger's Syndrome, a condition that I hadn't previously heard of. But after obtaining a diagnosis, I finally found that there was a characteristic for who I am. I had had it all my life, but I didn't find out until I was nearly 20-years-old (I was born in 1978) ...

For the first time, I was able to review my life appropriately since my diagnosis, such as my inability to make friends and socialise, and why I couldn't understand so many unwritten rules of social interaction such as dress sense, figures of speech etc. Also, I felt I could review my strengths and weaknesses appropriately. For instance, where I am weak is being able to deal with pressure and unpredictability. I like to stick to routine where I can to avoid high levels of anxiety for which I take Prozac to control. However, where I am strong is my memory for facts and figures and being able to recall dates and happenings. Many people who know me have told me that they would like to have a memory like mine. But what they sometimes don't realise is that although my memory can hold much information, rather like a database, I still have difficulty being able to think flexibly.

I had hoped that the worst of my school years would be behind me once I got to university. Initially, I didn't think I was clever enough to enter university, but I managed to get in by default, so I didn't have much choice in terms of what subjects I could pursue. However, I was very strong at writing, and it was suggested that I could perhaps make a career out of being a sports writer/journalist, particularly as I could memorise all the commentary from football and cricket matches. I ended up studying Media Studies at the University of Teeside, as it was suggested that my recall would be beneficial here. Making friends at university was difficult, as was being away from home for the first time. Other students around me, I found, were often ambitious and career minded, so I couldn't relate to topics of conversation. Much socialising at university involved drinking, which I never took to.

I had reservations about quitting after my first year, but after some encouragement from my parents, I decided to stay on. During my second year, I started to get very depressed. I was very isolated and wasn't happy with my studies, and generally didn't want to be there. By now, I had had enough of all the constant changes to exam dates and assignment deadlines. The more depressed I became, the more I lost my appetite and wasn't eating proper meals, losing a lot of weight. Eventually, I began to self-harm. Fortunately, this didn't last too long.

After being diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, I spent some time off university, where I attended cognitive therapy sessions at European

Services for People with Autism (ESPA), where I got to meet other people with the condition. Once my self-esteem improved, I could go back to university for my final year. When I returned to university, it was recognised by my tutors, Philip Cass and Adrian Quinn that I had Asperger's Syndrome. To their credit, they read up about the condition and through my co-operation, made special arrangements for my final year. This included access to a student counsellor and extra time for exams. I also had appointment with a learning support worker who helped me with study skills. Following these arrangements, my work was much improved. After diagnosis, my colleagues became much more tolerant of me, now that they knew there was a reason for why I was different." (Mitchell, 2008).

Told by a college student with Asperger Syndrome, Chris' story is representative of other postsecondary students living with this neurological disorder. In fact, according to National Institutes of Health (NIH) statistics, one in 500 people in the United States has Asperger's, which is a higher rate of occurrence than the more widely known Down Syndrome (Fast). Like other students, Chris faces the same delays interacting socially, presents problems communicating with others, and finds it difficult to adjust to change (Castle, Davidson, and Nizzi, 2003). An exact diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome is difficult to come by. Scientists and doctors disagree on what exactly Asperger's is. While the debate on the cause and symptoms may go on indefinitely, the larger issue for the person diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome is the impact Asperger's has on their life.

In this case it is specific to the impact on both the college student and those around him or her that are important..

History:

Observed first in 1944 by pediatrician Dr. Hans Asperger, Asperger Syndrome (also called Asperger's) was first noticed in boys who exhibited autistic-like behaviors (Castle et al, 2003). Consistent with a diagnosis of autism, this neurological abnormality forces the brain to process information in a different way (Castle et al, 2003). Although the social problems and communication issues characteristic of autism were present, so were a normal to above average intelligence and proper language development, making it slightly different from what was considered autism (*What's Unique*). Specialists at that time saw Asperger Syndrome as a milder or "high-functioning autism" (*What's Unique*). Despite first being recognized by researchers in 1944, it took until the 1980's for Asperger's to be recognized by professionals in the fields of education and psychology.

Once recognized, experts began debating whether or not this newly diagnosed syndrome was in fact related to autism. A professor with the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience of University College London, Uta Frith declared those with Asperger's to have "a dash of autism" (*What's Unique*). The reason for the debate stems from the characteristics that make up these two disorders. Both are broadly placed under the umbrella term of pervasive developmental disorders (PDD) (Love, 2001). Both affect social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication, the ability to be flexible by changing thoughts and activities quickly as opposed to following their rigid schedules, and usually involve an area of interest that is patterned in a narrow and unusual way (Lord,2008).

Asperger Syndrome vs. autism spectrum

Those on the autism spectrum and those with Asperger Syndrome share the above named traits. The difference lies in the extent and degree of the complexities presented (Lord, 2008). Children with Asperger's differ completely from those with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in that they have average to above average IQ, and that they have very few, if any, language delays (*Asperger's*). Unlike those with ASD, those with Asperger's have the IQ to notice a distance between themselves and children without this disorder. Where a child with ASD does not have an interest in others, the child with Asperger's actually wants to fit in; they just cannot figure out how (Lord, 2008). While autism can usually be seen in young children, usually by age two, Asperger's is typically not noticed until a later age. There are even adults today living with undiagnosed Asperger Syndrome who notice a difference but are unsure as to what it is. According to one source, Asperger's overlaps autism but has a more hopeful prognosis (Reed, 2005).

So which is it? Is the degree of difficulty the true difference between the autism spectrum and Asperger Syndrome, or is it the differences that hold more weight? The answer is obviously still being debated in professional circles. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), autism spectrum disorders include autism, Asperger Syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorders not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) (*Autism Spectrum Disorders*). Asperger Syndrome was officially documented in 1994 as a separate disorder from autism in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) (*What's Unique*). However, both are reported in the DSM-IV as having essentially the same characteristics.

As Shakespeare so eloquently enlightened, "What's in a name? that which we call a rose/ By any other name would smell as sweet" (Shakespeare, 2004, p.1021, II.ii.43-44). The same is true for Asperger Syndrome. Whether it is or is not on the spectrum is unclear and irrelevant.. It is what happens after one has been diagnosed with Asperger's that is of any importance. As was previously mentioned, Asperger's is not as easily diagnosed in young children as autism. In fact, most cases are not noticed until after age three (Love, 2001). Some cases, an estimated 30-50% of people living with Asperger Syndrome, remain undiagnosed permanently (Fast). For those who are diagnosed at a young age, early intervention is essential (*Facts for Parents*). While the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that all children be screened for Asperger's at eighteen months and twenty-four months, a formal diagnosis is not necessary for a child with a suspected disorder to benefit from treatment (*Why Early Identification*).

A factor that can delay appropriate intervention often comes from the fact that a person was previously misdiagnosed with a similar but different disorder. This has happened with such disorders as Nonverbal learning disability (NLD), Attention deficit disorder (ADD), Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) to name a few (Castle et al, 2003). If a person is receiving services for the wrong disorder, it may still be beneficial towards their treatment for Asperger's, but it is not as advantageous as if the disorder was properly diagnosed. Due to a delay in detection, the wrong diagnosis, various treatments, and varying degrees of difficulty among those with Asperger Syndrome, the resulting population of people with this disorder is quite variable in how it is represented.

Asperger Syndrome and the Determination of the College Student

Though people who have Asperger's may differ drastically, many of them are making the same decision about continuing their education at a postsecondary institution. What does this mean? On the part of the student it means adjusting to a completely new environment and way of learning surrounded by new places and faces. For the professors and administration it means making the necessary accommodations to aid in the learning of such students. In order for the university to better help the students, they need to first be informed about the potential problems college students with Asperger's may face.

The difficulty experienced by those with Asperger Syndrome in the college community is mainly due to the lack of social understanding. In fact, the main concern most students with Asperger's face is how to get along at a university socially (Harpur, 2002). Interpersonal and social problems arise when the student cannot understand the social cues of others. Without understanding their companions' true meaning, the person with Asperger's finds it hard to respond appropriately (Lord, 2008). A lack of eye contact and deficit knowledge about body language and how to interpret it adds to the difficulty. The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke explains that members of this population also find it hard to connect with others on a deeper level, which is largely due to problems communicating their own feelings through expressive language (*Asperger's Syndrome*). Members of this population also have trouble understanding metaphors and similes (Lord, 2008). Their speech itself presents its own problems. The prosody is affected by a smaller range of intonation and characterized as garrulous, limited, and contradictory (Love, 2001). To the layperson this means that they may present wordy, monotone speech and tend to go off on tangents limited to certain topics.

Verbal and nonverbal means of communication are not the only things making it hard for these students to connect with their peers. A limited interest area involves rote learning of facts or figures as opposed to an integrated understanding of the meaning, which makes discussions with other students problematic (Packer *Asperger's Disorder Overview*, 2004). Also, an exceedingly narrow realm of curiosity makes it tough to have much to talk about with peers who do not share the same high level of idiosyncratic concentration. Repetitive routines can be beneficial for any student (e.g. study habits); however, a strict adherence to them, and an inability to control their occurrence, can cause problems having a social life and problems in everyday activities. Exam dates change, homework is assigned randomly, and people get called in to work.. Any combination of events can force students to rearrange their schedules, and though this may not seem like a big deal to many students, to a student with Asperger's it is. Change is difficult for people with Asperger's, great importance may be placed on a certain event or plan, and when it falls through it can be hard for people with Asperger's to deal with (Harpur, 2002).

Group work is a common and expected activity in college classrooms, but once again this involvement may be extremely difficult for a student with Asperger Syndrome. Flexibility is called into play as the student with Asperger's has to work around the schedule of others instead of creating one that suits him or her best (Harpur, 2002). This can be difficult for the person with Asperger Syndrome. Next, the student must face the three main sources of anxiety common to this group: meeting new people, making new friends, and fitting in with the group (Harpur, 2002). Anxiety and stress are quite common among all college students. However, it is far more difficult for those with

Asperger Syndrome who experience high levels of stress and anxiety without a capable way of expressing their problems or any friends to talk to. For this reason, it is not surprising that anxiety disorders and depression rates are higher among the Asperger's population (Harpur, 2002).

Other issues arise that are not necessarily socially based. If this is the first time the student with Asperger's will be living outside of his or her parent or guardian's home, they will not only be dealing with a new school and environment, but also their newly found independence. This is a complex transition for all students. Cooking, cleaning, shopping, laundering, and paying the bills is now completely up to the undergraduate; dealing with people in close quarters (e.g. residence halls) is also a first time experience for many. This is a particular issue for a person with Asperger's to find a roommate who understands Asperger's and who the person with Asperger Syndrome can trust and be comfortable with. Though it can be a positive attribute to be trusting of others, it can also be an easy way for other to exploit the student's naivete'. For those with Asperger's who are said to generally take people at face value, there is a definite possibility that the student may be taken advantage of (Harpur; 2002).

Recommendations for Students and Staff

Before heading off to college and getting that first apartment, there are a few things to take care of. In order to know how to deal with his or her own issues, the student should speak with current counselors, teachers, team members and relatives (*Obtaining Accommodations*, 2003). These people know the student specifically and may even be able to explain certain aspects of his or her own condition to the student. Also, knowing what accommodations are working in school now will aid the student

once away pursuing a higher education at the less structured and more independent college level. According to literacy specialist J. Cloat, going one step further by providing this information to all of the student's new lecturers would also be most valuable (Personal Interview, April 17, 2008). Every college has a disabled student services center, and this should be the next phone call made by the student. This discussion will allow for the student to both explain his or her needs to the university and to find out what the college plans to do for him or her (Harpur; 2002).

While some students may be able to simply pack up one day and head off to a land unknown, this will most likely not be as easy for the student with Asperger's. An individual tour of the campus weeks before classes begin is one way of easing into the change (Harpur; 2002). At this visit the student and the family can find appropriate living arrangements and map out the college and town. Changes are another extremely difficult thing for people of all ages with Asperger's (Harpur; 2002). Familiarizing the student before he or she is actually sent to live there can also give the student time to mentally prepare for their new environment and make the change easier. Making choices in a completely new environment is more frightening because the student is unaware of what the consequences may be, and the fear of the unknown causes a lot of anxiety for those with Asperger's (Harpur; 2002). Meeting the professors and advisors ahead of time can give both parties the chance to become familiar with each other and for the student to explain any special needs to the teacher. The more information gained before actually heading off to college the better, because knowledge is power and according to Succeeding in College with Asperger Syndrome for people with Asperger's "to be forewarned is to be forearmed" (Harpur; 2002).

Arming the student with helpful social contacts can be a way of getting him or her into the social arena. Students with this disorder are advised to study social cues, gestures, and nonverbal communication similar to that of studying a second language (Harpur, 2002). Also, colleges have a plethora of organizations that students can join. What easier way to make friends than to see people with the same interest as yourself on a regular basis (Harpur, 2002)? Between making new friends, learning more about a group, and becoming involved, college societies are a functional resource for students with Asperger's. Another such resource is through the professionals at the university. Along with counselors, there is also the Center for Access-Ability Resources (CAAR) office. By informing this organization about the student's diagnosis, the representatives at the CAAR office can in turn help the student by making accommodations for classes and exams.

Classes are probably the most important aspect of college. It stands to reason then that choosing the proper class is also quite essential. Speaking with an academic advisor, reading over the syllabus with the topics and due dates, and purchasing the books ahead of time to get familiarized are all ways to ensure that the student is prepared for success in the correct classes. It is easy for any student to become frazzled with a tricky class or a tough semester, but this is especially true if the student has a hard time self-monitoring his or her schoolwork (*College Survival Skills*, 2007). People with Asperger Syndrome reportedly find staying focused on a single topic one of their biggest difficulties (Harper, 2002). Group work in the classroom presents another arena of difficulty for the student with Asperger syndrome (Harpur, 2002). It can help for the student to explain Asperger's to the other group members. However, if the student does

not wish for his or her peers to know about the disorder, he or she can also try to choose a part of the group work that will work for them.

Faculty Accommodations

Though much of the responsibility rests with the student, there are things that the professor and staff can do to aid a student with Asperger's. Using complicated speech or wordy instructions may make classroom instruction difficult on a student with Asperger Syndrome (Lord, 2008). Second, limit the number of choices with assignments and tests. If there are too many alternatives it may cause difficulty (Packer *Classroom tips*, 2004). Keeping to the structure promised in the syllabus will keep the student on track and when changes are necessary, announce them well in advance, repeat the changes several times and go over in detail the things that will be impacted by the change. Avoid slang and idiomatic speech whenever possible and explain it whenever used. The same is true for sarcasm and metaphors. When gestures and slang are used it is vital to the student with Asperger's that the teacher explain their meaning (Castle et al, 2003). Avoid situations that could result in a sensory overload. A person with Asperger Syndrome may be more easily susceptible to over stimulation due to sights, sounds, tastes, smell, and touches or textures (Castle et al, 2003).

As indicated by J. Cloat, pairing up is one of the hardest things her students with Asperger's face (Personal Interview, April 17, 2008). Assigning partners can avoid any problems with group situations. Cloat also cautions that teachers must remember that the population of people with Asperger Syndrome is diverse and that no two students should be treated equally. Therefore, the professor should test a variety of accommodations upon each student to find the best fit for that particular person. Some students have a

hard time connecting comments in classroom discussion (Castle et al, 2003). For these students it may be helpful to reiterate the point using a few words and making sense of them.

This lack of comprehension of vocabulary is also evident in their reading ability; although some students may possess a large vocabulary, the semantics (i.e. word use) may be lost on them. This fact also affects note taking; the student hears what the instructor is saying, but has a hard time deciphering what is truly meant. There is also trouble deciding what is important from what is simply a side note. Difficulty understanding the professor and weakness in multitasking between listening and taking notes relates to difficulty in test taking situations. The professor clarifying exactly what is meant and stressing the important facts can eliminate all of these problems. If the instructor notices a problem in this area, perhaps emailing the student the notes ahead of time or creating outlines of significant concepts would be beneficial (Castle et al, 2003). Today's use of Power Point and e-technology can also serve to assist the student with Asperger Syndrome. Other ways to alleviate stress during the exam would be to give the student with Asperger's extra time to complete the assessment and to make sure the test environment is as distraction-free as possible.

Conclusion

The decision to continue education at a postsecondary institution should be encouraged for anyone. Students with disabilities, including Asperger Syndrome should consider this as an option for themselves as well. Yes, there are added problems for the student with Asperger's that does make this decision. However, there are precautions the student can take and accommodations the professor can make to formulate an easier

college experience for the incoming student.. For the person with Asperger Syndrome who decides to go to college and works his or her way through it like all of their non-disabled counterparts, there is no reason why he or she will not be as successful as any other college graduate. Remember Chris? He not only made it to graduation but continued on to earn his Masters (Mitchell, 2008).

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