



Participating, Navigating and Succeeding with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Ontario Postsecondary Education System

By *Jennifer Luey*

Introduction

Increases in the frequency of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) within the postsecondary education system are now beginning to surface. Through a review of the literature this paper will focus on the persistence, retention and successful completion of autistics in the postsecondary education (PSE) sector. I found no concrete statistics for the prevalence of autism, however the Autism Society of Canada conservatively estimates that 1 in every 200 children in Canada have been diagnosed with Autism (Wood, 2013, p. 1). Currently the approximate graduation rate is 20% for the autistic population in the postsecondary sector, which is extremely low (MacKenzie, 2014, 3m 14s). An investigation into the causes of low persistence and retention is needed to determine the necessary actions to increase graduation rates for this particular population. "Recent reviews of outcomes have indicated that individuals with ASD experience low rates of college completion, employment, independent living, and life-long friendships on graduation." (Wehman, Schall, Carr, Targett, West & Cifu, 2014, p. 32) Using the triad of accessibility, funding and quality is a useful tool, however these aspects are all interrelated, and when one aspect of the triad is affected the other two are also affected. These students are an available market that has many talents to contribute to the postsecondary education sector and society.

The brilliance of many of these students will add to the academic classroom, to research potential, and to relationships of faculty. The unique insight into the world that students on the spectrum bring to campus culture will broaden the view of other college students and everyone in the campus community. (Wolf, Thierfeld Brown, & Kukiela Bork, 2009, p. 203)

Defining Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism spectrum disorder also referred to as ASD is characterized by symptoms and characteristics on a spectrum. These symptoms can manifest themselves in a variety of combinations and to varying degrees from mild to severe (Alcorn MacKay, 2010).

Autism is a complex developmental disorder that typically affects a person's ability to communicate, form relationships and respond appropriately to his or her environment. The disability results from a neurological disorder that impedes normal brain development in the areas that govern social interaction and communication skills. (Alcorn MacKay, 2010)

This must be at the forefront of one's mind when assisting students within the postsecondary education system. For the purpose of this paper the focus will be placed on the "high-functioning" individuals with ASD. Some of the characteristics present for this group would be repetitive body movements and sensory stimulation, social challenges, in-depth interests and talents, routine and rule oriented tendencies, co-morbidity and a different interpretation of the understanding of language (Alcorn MacKay, 2010). I discuss each of these below. These challenges affect an individual's ability to function affectively within the postsecondary education sector. High functioning autistics are known to have average to above average IQ scores, and are able to meet the entrance requirements and plan to attend college or university.

Body Movements and Sensory Stimulation

Many students on the spectrum have repetitive body movements or tics, which may present as hand flapping, rocking, and/or spinning. Some individuals may need body movement in order to concentrate on a task. This may be disturbing to faculty and peers, who may not understand the necessity for these movements.

Students on the spectrum may have hypo or hypersensitive senses; sight, smells, sound and tastes may be exaggerated or even painful (Wolf, Thierfeld Brown, & Kukiela Bork, 2009, p. 24).

Social Challenges

Social interaction is a learned concept for most individuals with ASD. The inability to interpret body language and read social cues are some of the challenges for students with ASD. Establishing and maintaining relationships do not come naturally to these individuals.

In-depth Interests and Talents

Individuals with ASD often have in-depth interests such as: moving vehicles, statistics, computers, science, and collections. Often their talents include: superior pitch perception and other musical abilities, noticing details in patterns, better visual acuity, quick puzzle solving. They are also less likely to have false memories, and are efficient at assembling and ordering information (Alcorn MacKay, 2010; Cowen, 2009). "Autistics also have, to a varying degree, strong or even extreme abilities to memorize, perform operations with codes and ciphers, perform calculations in their head, or excel in many other specialized cognitive tasks (Cowen, 2009, p. 3)." Interests and talents can dominate an individual's conversation, which may not be of interest of the other participant.

Routine and Rule Oriented

ASD students tend to thrive on routine and consistency in their daily activities. They are not normally flexible in this area of their lives; they like to know what is expected (rules) and what the order of their day is going to look like. Having to change a route may disrupt their day and can become quite upsetting for an ASD student. Step-by-step clear visual policies and formal agreements work best with this group of students (Wolf, Thierfeld Brown, & Kukiela Bork, 2009).

Co-morbidity

Many students with ASD also have co-morbid conditions to consider. These may include high levels of anxiety and/or depression. These additional factors may contribute to the inability to cope with a fast paced environment such as the current education system. Co-morbid conditions can lead to constant misunderstandings about their behaviours (Alcorn MacKay, 2010).

Understanding of Language

Students with ASD typically are very literal concerning language. The use of irony, humour, metaphors and pragmatic language are difficult for them to interpret which make understanding what is being portrayed more confusing. Many autistic students are visual thinkers and need clear concrete examples; they have difficulty thinking in the abstract (Grandin, 2007).

The Triad

Through the exploration of the triad of accessibility, funding and quality, we can identify the areas in which the postsecondary education sector is contributing to the inclusion of students on the spectrum. Each actor involved perceives these three aspects differently, which creates a complex structure which these students need to learn to advocate for themselves in and maneuver through. It is difficult for the neuro-typical population to identify and understand the special needs of ASD.

Persistence and Student Engagement

Extrapolation would suggest that students with ASD have lower rates of persistence concerning postsecondary education. The possibility of an autistic student dropping out within the first few weeks of their first semester is extremely high. This is normally due to challenges in transitioning and navigating the postsecondary education system and the inability to plan for and organize the needed coursework; handle sensory overload of a noisy campus; or ask for help from available services when needed (Sicile-Kira & Sicile-Kira, 2012). ASD students are considered adults and are required to be their own advocates, though many students remain dependent upon family for support, and only through written permission can the families of these students gain access in assisting them.

Accessibility

Students with ASD usually have very different needs than other individuals that use the Disability Service Office. Some of the needs to consider for accessibility are academic accommodations, transition planning, institutional selection and housing.

Academic Accommodations

Under the Ontario Human Rights Code students on the spectrum are eligible for academic accommodations, as long as they produce the suitable documentation, this is to encourage equal access (Alcorn MacKay, 2010). Academic accommodations are offered through the Disability Service Office but some of their needs are not available within PSE system such as,

designated safe rooms, extensive transition planning and sensory accommodations. However, some students may not self-identify making it difficult to track the persistence rate of this group as certain individuals may not need academic accommodations.

Some of the more common academic accommodations are reduced course load, alterations to exams and tests, presentations, group work and classroom (environment) modifications. To be successful in writing exams or tests some students may require a reduction in distractions (a separate room), extended time, the use of a computer, clarification of questions, breaks as needed, an oral supplement to essays and the elimination of Scantron cards. ASD students can have extremely high anxiety levels making presentations extremely difficult, which may sometimes lead to a complete meltdown. Through the use of webcasts or videotaped presentations, or presenting only to the professor or the use of an alternate assignment (used sparingly), these anxieties can be minimized while still completing the course outcomes. Classrooms are a place of anxiety for individuals on the spectrum. Students are expected to sit and listen for long periods of time. Classroom modifications assist an ASD student in attending classes successfully. These modifications may include: no cold calling in class, permission to bring sensory object, drink or food, breaks as needed, and a note taker or audio recorder (Wolf, Thierfeld Brown, & Kukiela Bork, 2009).

The less familiar accommodations for exams are allowances for body movement (pacing or fidgeting), allowing sensory toys that don't disrupt the environment, the use of sensory limiting devices such as; wearing sunglasses or headphones, alternate format for exams which could include a substitution for an assignment this should be used sparingly as most faculty will not accommodate in this manner. Classroom modification or coursework may include: larger worksheets for individuals with spatial issues, the access to a whiteboard to write down questions to be answered at the end of a lecture, preferential seating, and the allowance of body movement (Wolf, Thierfeld Brown, & Kukiela Bork, 2009) (Hart, Grigal & Weir, 2010).

At the faculty's discretion these accommodation may or may not be implemented. This is a barrier for students with ASD, because of their limited social skills and anxiety; their lower persistence rates are due to the inability to self-advocate for their needs. These skills need to be cultivated by secondary schools, parents, clinical service providers and the Disabilities Service Office.

Transition Planning

For young people with "high functioning" autism, the changes and demands associated with transitioning to postsecondary can be crippling and this requires active collaboration on behalf of the Disabilities Service Office, the secondary school, parents, external clinical services and especially the student. Creating explicit rules, scripts, and expectations for students, optimally would occur prior to the start of the semester (Wolf, Thierfeld Brown, & Kukiela Bork, 2009). Taking into consideration the expectation of increased independence, self-directed learning, time management, a less structured timetable, new social situations, and a change in location can be quite overwhelming for ASD students. Social

changes for some may outweigh the academic demands (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014). An extensive transition plan that begins well before the beginning of the first semester would enable the student time to become familiar with the campus, processes, services and social life of campus. Transition planning would assist the student in increased persistence if they were familiar with the environment and which services to seek help from prior to semester start up.

Institutional Selection

Choosing a postsecondary institution is a complex venture; there are many factors to consider for ASD students and their parents. Large institutions in urban environments usually have a wider selection of programs and courses, making it easier to target a student's interest. They may also have more student support and external community programs. This may be an advantage for these students. On the other hand large institutions are overwhelming and students may have trouble coping with the demands of navigating a larger campus and finding the services they need. Families should ask whether the institution has counselors who specialize in autism, whether faculty, support services and administration received training in ASD, and what types of academic accommodations are made. Students should inquire about social opportunities. Does the institution have autism organizations or support groups for students? Would the institution find a peer mentor or coach (Kossler, 2008)?

There are also benefits in attending smaller institutions, which would consist of smaller class sizes, a less congested and maneuverable campus, shorter wait times for services and an increased intimacy with faculty. However, many small institutions are located in small cities or rural areas. This could limit the amount of community services offered to individuals with ASD.

The ideal scenario would be a small postsecondary institution or small campus within a larger institution within a larger urban center. They would then gain the benefits of a small campus and still be able to access the community services they require.

Housing

Deciding the most appropriate place for an ASD student is difficult; parents want to know their children are safe. However, residences are very congested and sometimes quite loud. If there is an opportunity for a single room this may be beneficial for an ASD student. Peers sometimes observe eating habits and organizational strategies as strange, and a single room would minimize their anxiety levels and provide them with a safe environment. Clear rules and expectations should be laid out prior to their arrival in residence. An emergency plan should be implemented for an ASD student so that support personnel and security are equipped to deal with any issues or meltdowns.

Funding

Funding is an obstacle for most postsecondary students but for an ASD student it may determine whether the pursuit for a degree or diploma is attainable. ASD students have an extensive amount of additional

expenses to consider in conjunction with tuition fees. Low persistence rates may be attributed to the high costs of postsecondary tuition fees, the extensive forms that need to be completed in order to gain access to funding subsidies, and the complex process of finding these subsidies.

Additional Expenses

To gain access to disability services individuals with ASD must have a current psycho-educational assessment in order to prove their need for assistance and accommodations, these assessments cost thousands of dollars. Students may require more intensive private and community supports such as: counseling, psychiatric and/or psychological services and occupational therapy (Alcorn MacKay, 2010). Some students also require pharmaceuticals in order to treat any co-morbid conditions. All these added costs become another barrier, and only a portion of the expenses will be recouped by the students' health benefits plan.

Some ASD student's benefit from hiring independent resource people, or coaching organizations, but these are very costly supports and many cannot afford them. Thousands of dollars can be put towards using these supports; they may increase a student's persistence and success. However, they may cripple their own or their families financial stability in the process.

A transition strategy that is useful for students with ASD is to take a reduced course load for at least the first semester of university or college as this may minimize stress. This will help with the transition into a new daily schedule that may lack consistency, a new physical environment, the intensity of coursework, and a change in lifestyle. "Since many students with ASD have a reduced course load as part of their accommodations, this can result in students having to take an additional semester and additional semesters to complete a program (Alcorn, MacKay, 2010, p. 14)." Decreasing the course load adds to the financial burden of funding their postsecondary education. Some of the hidden costs of a reduced course load are added living expenses and students with ASD have limited resources, most parents spend a great deal of their finances in therapy costs. This makes saving for postsecondary tuitions fees difficult. Another hidden expense would be the loss of earnings for a student who takes additional semesters to complete their program.

Tuition Subsidies and Loans

Students can apply for bursaries, one of which can only be applied for through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). Applying for OSAP is recommended as eligibility for the bursary for students with disabilities is contingent upon OSAP eligibility (Manett & Stoddart, 2012). This can be an added strain to the already complex situation. The OSAP process in addition to all the other services they need to access may cause additional stresses to the student. There are extensive applications and deadlines for loans and bursaries placing additional exertion and burden on these students.

Quality

Students on the spectrum would have a unique perspective of what

they would consider quality in a postsecondary educational institution. Their experiences would be unlike anyone else, based on their unique needs and perspectives. These students would benefit from specialized programs, an alternative learning model and selectivity in choosing faculty members.

Specialized Programming

ASD students have many talents to bring to the PSE system, and sometimes very narrow interests. They may not excel in the general education courses needed to meet their program requirements. On the other hand, they usually exceed expectations in their preferred areas of interest. Postsecondary institutions may wish to consider alternate strategies for assisting in the transition to the workforce in place of general electives. Internships and job coaching are excellent ways in beginning the transition to employment. Curriculum could be built into these placements in order to fulfill the general elective requirements.

Learning Models

Postsecondary educational institutions tend to adopt the teaching model verses a learning model. Students are expected to adapt to the teaching style of a faculty member. This can create a barrier for an ASD student; their interpretation of assignment expectations may not suite the faculty's teaching strategies. A learning model may be an advantage for these particular students. Due to their specialized interests, which draw them to a particular program, they would have the ability to gain knowledge and assist in the development of the class and potentially contribute to faculty research. Universal design strategies would allow for a more inclusionary approach to learning. "Universal design in higher education helps meet the challenge of accommodating a diverse student body, including students with ASD and Intellectual Disability (ID), by utilizing flexible instructional materials, techniques, technology, and strategies that empower educators to meet these varied needs." (Hart, Grigal, & Weir, 2010, p. 142) Learning is not only the absorption of knowledge and facts but also the creation. Fostering new perspectives will engage these students.

Faculty Selection

Faculty selection is an important component for individuals with ASD. An academic advisor may be able to assist in making recommendations about matching a student to a faculty member who may be able to meet their needs (Sicile-Kira & Sicile-Kira, 2012). Students desire a faculty member who has a good understanding of the spectrum but who will not make preconceived assumptions about the individual student. ASD students appreciate faculty members who have high academic expectations but who understand and can accommodate their particular needs. Faculty members are usually respected unless they appear illogical or poorly organized. Haphazardness and lack of organization and knowledge is frustrating for an ASD student because they perceive the faculty member as incapable of performing their duties within an institution (Oslund, 2014). This can result in misunderstandings and a potentially damaging reputation for a specific ASD student. Finding compatible personalities between student and faculty will promote the persistence of the student; having a good role model can lead to the student

demonstrating appropriate social interaction and emulating good work ethic. Students with ASD should be encouraged to disclose their condition with accepting faculty members; this may lead to understanding and the formulation of a positive relationship. The potential outcome of such a relationship may incite mentorship, job offers or internships, which will in turn foster an increase in the students' self-esteem.

Retention the Postsecondary Education Approach

Postsecondary education institutions are required to retain high retention rates. In order to accomplish this task implementing processes that contribute to the accessibility of lifelong learning contributes to the preserving their student body. Supporting this unique population has many benefits for the PSE sector as their contributions to the academic community has the potential to be world changing.

Accessibility

In response to sustaining retention rates, universities and colleges have created specialized programs in order to reduce the stresses for an ASD student and to assist them with the transition to the postsecondary system. Specialized supports include Disability Service Offices to assist with accommodations, orientation and transition programs, social groups and mentorship programs. These are the beginnings of an evolutionary foundation for supporting students with ASD.

Disability Services

Disability Service Offices help implement accommodations for ASD students. However, many disability personnel are not trained in supporting the specific needs of ASD students. A partnership with the parents and other service providers will assist in filling gaps concerning accommodations. We have found that parental involvement is sometimes essential to the success of the student (Wolf, Thierfeld Brown, & Kukiela Bork, 2009). ASD students may have high anxiety levels and poor social and communication skills making self-advocacy difficult. Students often need assistance in the beginning to learn the social norms for interacting appropriately with faculty. A step-by-step process may need to be implemented and monitored to ensure a successful negotiation concerning needed academic accommodations. Disability Service Offices are presented with some unique challenges concerning ASD students. Currently disability service workers spend a great deal of time learning about this population, understanding their unique needs, and fielding phone calls and attending meeting with students, parents, faculty, administration and clinical service providers. The Disability Service Office plays a crucial role in retaining these students.

Orientation and Transitions

Students with ASD have a difficult time with transitions. Overwhelming hallways and large buildings are hard for them to navigate. An extensive orientation assists with an individual learning the environment. Being familiar with the environment and being able to find classes and services will help to relieve some of the stresses, reducing anxiety. Some institutions offer multiple orientation sessions or comprehensive orientation programs

giving the student a chance to stay on campus for an extended period of time. Building students' comfort levels and self-esteem helps to reduce the anxieties for when all the students return to campus. Students are then able to become more familiar with staff, faculty and administrators', being able to recognize these individuals has a positive effect on the students' ability to ask for help, instead of losing a student who may "stop out" or never return.

Social Groups

Specialized social groups are beneficial for these students. Students can then share their experiences in navigating the postsecondary systems and give advice to each other concerning best practices. Gaining self-esteem and independence from their parents is encouraged, knowing that there are peers going through the same process and who have similar difficulties is comforting for many students. A great number of students with ASD have similar interests and forming social circles around these interests establishes a community for these students, which focuses on their interests instead of their disorder. Students are less likely to leave their community where they feel supported.

Mentorship Programs

Mentorship programs can be an effective device for ASD students. Upper year students are good role models in representing the student lifestyle and are effective guides for maneuvering through an institution. The Disability Service Office generally trains mentors, these students demonstrate leadership skills and sensitivity to issues related to disabilities (Manett & Stoddart, 2012, p. 2). Mentors may take the initiative in assisting in forming a social circle for an ASD student. This may have a positive effect in ASD students by increasing their self-esteem and ability to learn appropriate peer social interactions. Increasing peer support will assist in the retention of this population; feeling included is a strong desire for these students.

Other services

Postsecondary institutions offer other types of services on campus, including counseling services, tutoring services and writing centers. ASD students should be encouraged to seek out these supports. In order to facilitate a student's interaction with these services, a detailed description of what these services offer should be represented in written form and oral presentation, giving concrete examples of the purposes of these services and a tour of their facilities, will ease comfort levels in accessing these services.

Funding

The postsecondary education community needs to develop a thorough understanding of the special needs of ASD students. The organization for Autism Research created a series of videos to educate university and college staff. The first of the series is aimed at professors and the second is geared to residence assistants (Kossler Dutton, 2008). Through the investment in human capital and infrastructure, postsecondary education institution would be better equipped to support these students.

Investment in Human Capital

Additional funding needs to be invested into the training of all personnel who work with ASD students such as: support staff, faculty and administrators. The lack of knowledge concerning autism spectrum disorders leads to frustration for these particular students as well as faculty, support staff and the administrators working with them. Proper training can decrease misunderstandings and assumptions about this diverse population. Campus security, disability service workers and counselors should receive extensive training concerning working with ASD students. Meltdowns can be quite extreme and understanding how to react to an individual can quickly de-escalate a situation, instead of increasing the seriousness of a situation, which could potentially lead to the expulsion of a student. Disability services workers need strategies on how to effectively work with these students because there is the potential for the students' situations to become quite time consuming. Disability services workers may become bombarded with communications from, the student, parents, clinical service workers, faculty, security, and administrators. Setting out clear expectations for all parties can mitigate many issues.

Faculty members who understand the needs of ASD students will have more successful interactions in their classes.

It is important to remember that in many situations, faculty are being asked to think of creative accommodations or to learn to live with student behaviours that might at first seem unusual or even disrespectful until they better understand the underlying issues. (Wolf, Thierfeld Brown, & Kukiela Bork, 2009)

Furthermore, significant demand may be placed on their time to implement these accommodations. Faculty may need to monitor group work closely as many ASD students are taken advantage of by their peers, due to lack of understanding concerning social interactions. ASD students may have extensive knowledge in their area of interest and faculty may become inundated with answering questions during and after class. Maintaining a good working relationship between faculty and student will foster a higher retention rate, equipping the faculty with useful resources will minimize misunderstandings and harsh feelings.

It may be useful to invest in some designated ASD specialists or ASD coaches, who have extensive training and an understanding of how to guide and implement strategies. They would be a great resource for everyone involved with these students, alleviating some of the additional strains concerning sufficient time, resources and training to work with these students. "They could provide any necessary training in social skills, awareness and coping strategies for sensory needs, communication skills, organization, time management, structuring of written assignments, problem solving and/or self advocacy skills." (Alcorn MacKay, 2010, p. 28) They could also train any staff members that work with this group.

Investment in Infrastructure

Postsecondary institutions may want to consider modifications to the classroom and campus environment, accommodating this group of students

with private, quiet and low sensory environments. Ideally these rooms would be located close to tutoring or counseling centers. These environments would serve as an asset in the retention of this population; they must seek refuge from their high anxiety levels in order to function effectively within the classroom.

Quality

Postsecondary institutions have the right to maintain their academic standards. Institutions market their reputation to compete for potential students. Their reputation and prestige should not be compromised concerning the special needs of ASD students.

Postsecondary institutions have the right to determine the fundamental requirements for their courses and programs. Maintaining their academic standards, integrity and freedom should be of the utmost importance (Wolf, Thierfeld Brown & Kukiela Bork, 2009). Disability Service Offices must ensure that the academic accommodations employed do not undermine the program requirements and standards. "Professors must be reassured that they are still the ultimate authority in their classes and that the DS office wishes to assist in managing a student in their class (not mandate exactly how they must do it)." (Wolf, Thierfeld Brown, & Kukiela Bork, 2009, p. 168) ASD students do not want to have the system accommodate them to the point that their degree/diploma doesn't hold valued recognition. They desire professors who will still apply high standards to their work.

Postsecondary institutions are accountable to the public. Surveys are used to evaluate the quality of the institution, which are then published for public consumption for example Key Performance Indicator surveys. Many students base their decision about a postsecondary institution on these assessments. Autistic people with their intellectual prowess, usually find their way into the university system. They can then be misunderstood as detriments to the academy's goals; this perception needs to be mitigated and through understanding of this disorder new perceptions of autism can take place. Through new research and knowledge production autistic students can enhance an institutions' reputation. Through new learning methods professors can be free to engage in research projects, which brings the institution revenue and prestige (Prince-Hughes, 2001). Engaged students who value their institutions are the individuals who determine in part the quality of their postsecondary educational experience.

Success and the Betterment of Society

Researchers examining ASD in the postsecondary education system have found improved employment and self-determination outcomes for these students (Hart, Grigal & Weir, 2010). Investing in the futures of these students to complete a postsecondary education program will benefit the individual and society overall.

Accessibility

The Ontario government recognizes the need to assist students with ASD to achieve the necessary skills to pursue employment opportunities. This particular group of students excels in many areas such as engineering, technology, mathematics and science. They have the potential

to be the next great inventors, contributing to the competitive global marketplace. Their skills should be encouraged and honed, as they perceive the world through a different lens.

York University and Algonquin College are implementing two pilot projects. The objective of these projects is to help students build the skills they need through a variety of resources, activities and programs. These include an intensive summer program that allows students to reside on campus to help with orientation, workshops to manage time and deal with student life. In addition they will implement online resources and workshops for faculty to better understand the needs and teaching strategies for students with ASD. (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, News, 2014). Contributing to the accessibility of a postsecondary education, giving the tools to these students to succeed to graduation will in turn assist in alleviating the future needs of social services because they will have employability potential.

Funding

Specialized funding should be applied to specialized programs for students on the spectrum. With the number of students being identified with autism spectrum disorder, governments are encouraged to implement supports to help them gain the necessary skills to become active and contributing members of society.

Additional Investment in Specialized Programs

Due to the increase in autism spectrum disorder within the PSE sector, "Ontario is investing \$1.5 million over three years to help students with disabilities transition to postsecondary institutions" (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, News, 2014) Colleges and universities reported more than 1,200 students with autism spectrum disorder received supports and services in 2012-2013, and this number is only increasing (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, News, 2014). Through specialized programs these students can gain the skills necessary to excel in their chosen careers. Giving them the tools to improve their social skills, communication skills and behaviour will make them employable and highly sought after employees.

The Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities is providing a range of support to postsecondary institutions including funding for Community Integration through Co-operative Education (CICE) programs. These programs are designed for individuals with developmental disabilities who wish to further their education in a college setting (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2014, Postsecondary Education and Job Training). Investing in these programs is an excellent start for supporting adults with ASD.

Quality

Graduation rates are currently very low for the ASD community estimated at 20% for the autism population (MacKenzie, 2014). The ministries and postsecondary institutions are striving for higher retention and graduation rates and slowly this will become reality. Society must begin to see a return on their investments concerning these individuals. Students

with ASD have very particular talents and these need to be viewed as strengths. Promoting these strengths can lead to remarkable results in knowledge production and research. The global market place values ingenuity, engineering, mathematics and science. Finding suitable career paths will not only alleviate the need for more social funding concerning ASD, but will benefit society financially as these students make significant advances for humanity.

Conclusion

Increasing the persistence, retention and graduation rates for ASD students, provides society with well-educated, employable and productive contributors. We must ensure the quality of education provided must not be diminished, while trying to provide access and support measures. Funding must be established, to maintain quality and accessibility, finding financial stability that is reasonable for all party's involved. Finding balance is important for an inclusionary education for students on the spectrum. All members of society should have the opportunity to be supported in achieving their potential. Making the initial investments in the ASD community will decrease the need for long term social service funding. "It's time to stop focusing on all the things people 'can't' do, instead focus on tapping the sometimes-untapped potential that exists in each person." (Hart, Grigal, Weir, 2010, p. 137) This population has valuable contributions to make to the academic arena. By honing their talents and focusing on their interest, these individuals will excel in the global market and assist in supporting and developing their societies.

References:

- Alcorn Mackay, S. (2010). *Identifying Trends and Supports for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Transitioning into Postsecondary*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council Ontario.
- Barr, R.B. & Tagg, J. (1995). From teaching to learning: A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change*, Nov/Dec.
- Cowen, T. (2009). Autism as academic paradigm. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved From <http://chronicle.com/article/Autism-as-Academic-Paradigm/47033>
- Fichten, C.S., Asuncion, J.V., Barile, M., Robillard, C., Fossey M.E., & Lamb, D. (2003). Canadian postsecondary students with disabilities: Where Are They?. *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, XXXIII, 3, 71-114.
- Finnie, R., Childs, S., & Wismer, A. (2011). *Access to Postsecondary Education: How Ontario Compares*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
- Grandin, T. (2007). *Dr. Temple Grandin Speaking on Four Important Areas, plus a Section on her Personal Life*. [Documentary Film] Arlington, Texas: Future Horizons, Inc.
- Hart, D., Grigal, M., & Weir, C., (2010). Expanding the paradigm: Postsecondary education options for individuals with autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disabilities. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 25(3), 134-150. doi:

10.1177/1088357610373759

Kossler Dutton, M. (2008). Autistic students get help navigating college life. *USA Today*. Retrieved from http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/2008-07-08-autistic-college_N.htm

Lawson, W. (2001). *Understanding and Working with the Spectrum of Autism*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Legislative Assembly of Ontario. (2014). Select Committee on Developmental Services Interim Report. Retrieved from http://www.ontla.on.ca/committee-proceedings/committee-reports/files_html/INTERIMREPORTENG-Final.htm

MacKenzie, H. (2014). Self-Regulation a road to greater autonomy and fulfillment. *Autism Canada*. Retrieved from <http://vimeo.com/album/3134155/video/112054919>

Manett, J. & Stoddart, K.P. (2012). Facing the Challenges of Post-Secondary Education: Strategies for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), 46. Retrieved from [http://www.autismontario.com/client/aso/ao.nsf/docs/149395542949b52a85257bc10060dbc6/\\$file/facing+the+challenges+of+post+secondary+education.pdf](http://www.autismontario.com/client/aso/ao.nsf/docs/149395542949b52a85257bc10060dbc6/$file/facing+the+challenges+of+post+secondary+education.pdf)

Manett, J. & Stoddart, K.P. (2013). Thinking of Post-Secondary Education? Considerations for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Their Families, 58. Retrieved from <http://autismontario.novosolutions.net/default.asp?id=148>

Mitchell, W. & Beresford, B. (2014). Young people with high-functioning autism and asperger's syndrome planning for and anticipating the move to college: What supports a positive transition?. *British Journal of Special Education*, 41, 151-171. doi: 10.1111/1467-8578.12064

Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (February 6, 2014). More Supports for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *News*. Retrieved from <http://news.ontario.ca/tcu/en/2014/02/more-supports-for-students-with-autism-spectrum-disorder.html>

Oslund, C. (2013) *Supporting College and University Students with Invisible Disabilities: A Guide for Faculty and Staff Working with Students with Autism, AD/HD, Language Processing Disorders, Anxiety, and Mental Illness*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Prince-Hughes, D. (2002). *Aquamarine Blue 5. Personal Stories of College Students with Autism*. Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press.

Roumeliotis, J. (2014, January 8). Tremendous Talents. *The National*. Toronto: CBC. Retrieved from www.cbc.ca/player/embedded-only/news/ID/2428935184/

Sicile-Kira, C., & Sicile-Kira, J. (2012). *A Full Life with Autism: From Learning to Forming Relationships to Achieving Independence*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

VanBergeijk, E.O., & Cavanagh, P.K. (2012). Brief report: New

legislation supports students with intellectual disabilities in post-secondary funding. *Journal of Autism Development Disorder* 42, 2471-2475. doi: 10.1007/s10803-012-1481-4

Wehman, P., Schall, C., Carr, S., Targett, P., West, M., & Cifu, G. (2014). Transition from school to adulthood for youth with autism spectrum disorder: What we know and what we need to know. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 25, 30-40. doi: 10.1177/1044207313518071

Wolf, L. E., Thierfeld Brown, J., & Kukiela Bork, G. R. (2009). *Students with Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for College Personnel*. Kansas: Autism Publishing Company.

Wood, J., (2013, May 10). Here's an Autism Statistic: Family. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/heres-an-autism-statistic-family/article11833048/>

Wurzberg, G. (2014). *Wretches and Jabbers*. [Documentary Film] (Available from http://www.wretchesandjabberers.org/purchase_dvd.php)

Jennifer Luey is a graduate student in Higher Education at OISE/University of Toronto and teaches at George Brown College. She can be reached at Jennifer Luey [j.luey@mail.utoronto.ca].

The views expressed by the authors are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of The College Quarterly or of Seneca College.

Copyright © 2015 - The College Quarterly, Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology