Autism Goes to College:
A Workshop for Residential Life Advisors
(Practice Brief)

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Abstract

Many students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) experience substantial difficulties with socialization and independence, and college campuses often lack appropriate support services in these areas. Residential advisors (RAs), who are trained to support all students living on campus, could be uniquely prepared to positively contribute to the college experience for students with ASD. The aim of this work was to provide a workshop to RAs at a four-year university and to explore their level of knowledge, awareness, and preparedness in supporting students with ASD who live on campus. While over a third of RAs suspected that they had a student with ASD in their residence hall, many RAs expressed not knowing about ASD or understanding the role of student disability services on campus. Most respondents felt that they had a responsibility to support these students and agreed that training in ASD would be useful, suggesting that more extensive training is warranted.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, residential life, postsecondary education

Based on the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), a 10-year prospective study, as many as 16% of young adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are enrolled in four-year colleges (Sanford et al., 2011), and approximately 81% attend two-year colleges either exclusively or as a starting point prior to transferring to a four-year college (Wei et al., 2014). Although the prevalence of ASD on college campuses has been celebrated, NLTS2 data also revealed that only 44% of college attendees with ASD later graduated with a college degree, compared to 60% from all disability groups and 67% of the general population (Sanford et al., 2011). In order to facilitate more positive postsecondary outcomes, college-based programs are being designed and implemented to increase ASD awareness on campus and provide ASD-specific supports (Anderson et al., 2018; Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020); still, limited supports are available to students with ASD. This is even truer of supports within on-campus residential communities (Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020).

The expected responsibilities and skill set of residential advisors (RAs) are similar across college campuses. RAs should have a foundational understanding of human development and of strategies to foster growth in young adulthood, counseling skills (i.e., to listen, empathize, and help resolve problems), basic knowledge about the types of services available on campus, awareness about academic and social skills needed to succeed in college, and the ability to stimulate a sense of community in the housing unit (Blimling, 2003). Thus, RAs have the potential to foster meaningful opportunities in college for students with ASD, and we posit that better training for RAs can contribute to enhanced college experiences for these students.

Depiction of the Problem

Symptoms of ASD are evident across the lifespan. Youth with ASD often struggle with social communication, limiting their ability to initiate and

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maintain conversations with peers and to understand social cues (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Many young adults with ASD continue to report social difficulties in college, which can lead to limited social engagement, increased social isolation, and exacerbated social anxiety (White et al., 2011). In addition, students with ASD frequently experience challenges with independent living skills during young adulthood (Bal et al., 2015), such as self-help, health/hygiene, household maintenance, and money management. Due to persisting social and adaptive impairments in adulthood, college students with ASD may seek support in these areas to foster skills and promote independence.

The college setting might serve as an appropriate platform to support students with ASD in socialization and independent living, particularly as credence is often given to postsecondary education as the stepping stone to the future. While college faculty are mandated to provide *academic* accommodations to students who disclose their diagnosis to student disability services (i.e., Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973), the postsecondary community is generally less familiar with providing *non-academic supports* that students with ASD often prefer. For example, Cai and Richdale (2016) investigated the postsecondary experiences of 23 students with ASD. They found that while educational needs were generally met, students expressed not receiving adequate social supports. Students also reported barriers to receiving student disability services, including poor staff attitude, limited knowledge of ASD, and long wait times. In a study of 30 offices of student disability services at colleges offering bachelor degrees and graduate programs, only one office established an ASD-specific program on campus to address substantial issues that students with ASD demonstrated in their dormitories (Barnhill, 2014). Moreover, the College Autism Spectrum website provides a list of over 50 postsecondary institutions that offer support programs for students with ASD ("College Programs," n.d.) From this list, only four programs explicitly target residential life for these students; all four have associated costs, which puts limits on their usage. In general, colleges can and should be doing more to provide support for the non-academic needs of students with ASD living on campus.

A range of students with ASD live away from home (17-63%), indicating that these students are likely to reside in campus housing communities (Anderson et al., 2014; Bolourian et al., 2018; Gelbar et al., 2015). Barnhill (2014) found that room requests by students with ASD were most frequently made for a single room or a suite with a separate bedroom.

Although possible contributing factors to these housing requests were not investigated, for some of these students, it may be that certain environmental conditions (e.g., noise, music) cause significant discomfort due to sensory issues, or that they had prior negative experiences with a roommate. Indeed, students with ASD experience varying levels of satisfaction with on-campus living environments (Bolourian et al., 2018; Gelbar et al., 2015). In a sample of 35 students with ASD, Gelbar and colleagues (2015) found that a third of them reported receiving housing accommodations; of these students, 38% reported living in a single dorm room. Half of students reported enjoying living on campus, and 43% reported easily getting along with their roommates. However, some expressed more negative experiences of feeling isolated or being marginalized: "I had to leave the dorms, because I was being teased and taunted all day and night. I was the big joke of the dorm" (Gelbar et al., 2015, p. 49). While on-campus housing may not be appropriate for all students with ASD, RAs are in an ideal position to help facilitate more positive, inclusive environments for those who do live in on-campus housing, particularly by educating neurotypical students about autism. In fact, the need for ASD-specific training for residential staff was the most highly cited response from a survey administered to an expert panel of professionals in the field of autism, housing staff, and individuals diagnosed with autism as part of a dissertation study examining effective supports for college students with ASD (Clark, 2018).

One literature review, focused on empirically-supported interventions used to assist postsecondary students with ASD, revealed that of the 24 studies that met review criteria, only two addressed residential life issues (see review by Anderson et al., 2018). Yet, neither of the studies (Schindler & Cajiga, 2015; Smulsky et al., 2015) involved residential life training as part of the intervention. The review demonstrated the lack of research on ASD-specific programs available for students living on campus. Despite the demonstrated need for ASD-specific training (Clark, 2018), it is unclear whether RAs on college campuses are experienced or trained in ASD in any uniform way. Thus, this exploratory study aimed to understand the level of knowledge, awareness, and preparedness that RAs have towards supporting students with ASD, as assessed by an online questionnaire. RA perspectives were considered and integrated in the creation of an ASD workshop. At the end of the training, a second questionnaire was provided to understand whether the workshop met our goals of improved outcomes, such as increased ASD knowledge, awareness, and preparedness for RAs.

Description of Practice

At the request of campus housing program coordinators to the specialized autism center on campus, a one-hour training workshop was provided to RAs during program orientation prior to the beginning of fall quarter (one week before instruction began) at a four-year university in Southern California. The training was facilitated by staff from the university-based autism research center, known throughout the campus community for providing information and expertise related to autism awareness and state-of-the-art research to departments and other groups (e.g., library staff, academic advisors). The trainers included a faculty member and doctoral students specializing in school psychology, special education, and autism. While RAs undergo training as part of their annual program orientation, this workshop marked the first collaboration between the campus housing department and the autism research center. All procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Through the completion of a pre-training survey, 46 RAs voluntarily provided demographic information. Participants identified as 41.3% male. The mean age of the sample was 19.5 years (range = 18-22 years). The sample was diverse with 17.4% identifying as Caucasian, 32.6% as Latinx, 23.9% as Asian American, 4.3% as Middle Eastern, 2.2% as African American, and 19.6% as Bi/Multiracial. All RAs were non-freshman undergraduate students majoring in the social sciences (e.g., psychology, English, history), natural and agricultural sciences (e.g., biology, neuroscience, statistics), engineering, business administration, and public policy. The majority of respondents (63.0%) were new, first-year RAs in the program.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

Pre-Training Survey

About one month prior to the training workshop, RAs who were registered for orientation were invited to participate in a brief online survey (Tipton & Blacher, 2014; Zeedyk et al., 2019), designed to better understand the knowledge and awareness of ASD among faculty and staff in postsecondary settings. The survey was administered through Qualtrics software and was distributed via email by campus housing program coordinators in order to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of RAs. The survey included Likert-type items on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) and true/false statements. The percentage of RAs who agreed/

disagreed with statements regarding perceptions of ASD are displayed in Table 1. Table 2 shows the percentage of those who endorsed true/false on ASD knowledge items. A series of open-ended questions followed to ask participants about their experiences with ASD and what they wanted to know about ASD. Qualitative responses were explored to supplement our understanding of quantitative results; example quotes are provided in the results below.

Connection to ASD

A large proportion of RAs had a personal connection with ASD. One respondent identified as having a diagnosis of ASD. Eight respondents (17.4%) indicated that someone in their family had a diagnosis of ASD (three had a diagnosed sibling; five had an extended family member with ASD). Twelve respondents (26.1%) indicated that they had a friend with ASD. Sixteen respondents (35.6%) indicated that they had worked in some capacity (e.g., as part of a volunteer program, in another job, in a school/group project setting) with an individual who self-disclosed as having ASD. While none of the participants reported being approached by a student who self-disclosed their diagnosis of ASD, over a third (35.3%) of RAs suspected that they had a student with ASD in their housing community.

Seven RAs provided open-ended responses about their experiences working with students with ASD. Overall, these respondents expressed feeling comfortable working with students with ASD and had positive perspectives. For example, one respondent who worked with students with ASD as part of a summer job in high school stated, "I have noticed that [the students with ASD] were very attentive and hardworking, and their efforts usually went unnoticed." Another respondent, whose mother tutored a student with ASD, said that she found the student to be "social and smart" but acknowledged that many people may not have the same experience.

Overall Knowledge About ASD

Many RAs perceived themselves as having limited knowledge about ASD. However, when provided with concrete true/false statements about ASD, an overwhelming majority of RAs responded accurately. Thus, it may be that while RAs are actually well-informed about autism, they may be unsure about their depth of knowledge and feel underprepared to support students with ASD.

Student Disability Services

While the majority of RAs agreed that students with ASD should have access to accommodations on

campus, only half expressed that these students should disclose their disability to student disability services. Only two-thirds indicated that they understood the role of student disability services, suggesting that a third could benefit from learning more about how student disability services can support students with ASD, as well as themselves. Only half of RAs understood (agreed) that the office of student disability services was accessible to them as a resource.

Students with ASD in Residential Settings

While many RAs felt comfortable having college students with ASD in their residential setting, less than half reported feeling confident in supporting these students in residential environments. There was a fairly even distribution in responses about whether students with ASD should be expected to interact with peers in residential settings, suggesting that a dialogue about social expectations in residential life is warranted. A majority of respondents expressed the opinion that they should take a role in supporting students with ASD, and that a training program would be useful in helping them better support students with ASD.

What RAs Want to Know

Thirteen participants provided responses to the second open-ended question, "Is there anything you would like to know about students with ASD, specifically?" RAs expressed a desire to know more about:

a. Autism in general (e.g., "universal behaviors," "causes").
b. ASD in young adulthood, particularly as related to college (e.g., "I would like to know more about students with ASD at this university, since autism isn't always 'visible'").
c. Resources/strategies to support and interact with students with ASD in residential settings (e.g., "Are there any special accommodations we should implement?" "How do I help those with ASD adjust to college life?").

Learning Workshop

Approximately one month after completing the pre-training survey, 130 RAs attended the one-hour workshop as part of program orientation in the fall of 2018. By utilizing the responses of the 46 RAs who participated in the pre-training survey, RAs influenced learning goals, expectations, and content (Sufi et al., 2018). As a result, the informative portion of the workshop covered a range of topics related to understanding ASD, the transition to adulthood, social support, and strategies to assist students with ASD.

Table 3 displays the curriculum outline. The workshop also included interactive components, such as three role-play videos and Socratic questioning (from the UCLA PEERS® Program), as well as a facilitated discussion. The workshop concluded by informing RAs of a documentary, called *Autism Goes to College*, and distributing a summary handout, which included a list of resources that aligned with workshop topics, as well as our contact information and on-campus location. All role-play videos and the documentary trailer shown during the presentation were publicly available and freely accessible. Lastly, RAs were given an opportunity to ask questions regarding the training content, and presenters provided thorough responses. For example, one attendee asked how to create social programs that help support sensory needs (e.g., keeping the volume in residential settings low); another asked how to incorporate restricted interests into social programming (e.g., having a video game or movie-themed night). RAs were encouraged to contact or find us for further information and ongoing support after the workshop.

Post-Training Survey

After the workshop, 40% of participants completed a brief social validity survey independently distributed by program coordinators to protect RA anonymity. (These were not necessarily the same respondents who completed the pre-training survey.) Likert-scale items were administered to assess the usefulness of the training in increasing RAs' knowledge and awareness about ASD, as well as their preparedness for supporting students with ASD in on-campus housing. An open-ended question asked participants to name up to three things that they learned specifically from the training.

Usefulness of the Training

The percentage of RAs who agreed/disagreed with statements regarding the usefulness of the training are displayed in Table 4. Most respondents found the training helpful. As a result of participating in the training, the majority of RAs expressed knowing more about ASD, feeling more prepared to support students with ASD who live in their residential communities, and having an increased interest in learning more about how to access supports for students with ASD.

Learned Autism Knowledge

Responses from the open-ended question (e.g., to name up to three things that they learned specifically from this training) were consistent with topics covered during the workshop, for example:

a. Autism in general: "Autism is a spectrum, with symptoms and effects varying between individuals;" "There is no one cause of ASD."
b. ASD in young adulthood: "When autistic students enter college, they lose a majority of the supports they had in high school."
c. Resources/strategies: "Use inclusive language;" "We have (the university-based autism research center) as a resource on campus."

Implications and Portability

Although the completion of surveys was voluntary, thereby introducing some limitations related to selection bias, our findings suggest that RAs are eager to play a role in supporting the non-academic needs of students with ASD and are willing to participate in training specific to ASD in order to do so. It was noted that having some prior familiarity with autism may have prompted participation, at least in survey completion as 37 of the 46 respondents who completed the pre-program survey had some personal connection to ASD. The type of training provided for the overall group of RAs on ASD was feasible to implement and reported by participants to be beneficial.

A few recommendations follow to guide future trainings for campus housing communities. First, this work was a result of the developed partnership between our team of autism researchers/professionals and the campus housing department. Higher education institutions often have limited resources to invest in new programs. However, for college faculty, engagement in research, teaching, and community outreach is traditionally considered part of their core responsibilities. For graduate students, educationally-focused presentations enhance their scholarship. Thus, as highlighted by the expert panel in the Clark (2018) study, such cross-campus collaborations can be mutually beneficial in supporting students with ASD living on campus. Also, campus housing leaders were conferred with during the development of the training. By collaboratively involving them in planning, information was gained about the practices and norms within the housing community. Taken together, collaboration enhanced the coordination and planning of this workshop. Second, the content structure of the training was formed based on pre-training survey responses and, therefore, had an empirical base. Collecting data from the campus housing community prior to the development of training material may promote engagement and inclusivity, while ensuring that the workshop is relevant. Third, the obstacles of living in a residence hall can be particularly challenging for college students with ASD (Gelbar et al., 2015). Thus, the presence of an informed RA may be reassuring to students with ASD who decide to live on campus. This may be particularly true for students who choose not to disclose their diagnosis to disability support services and consequently do not receive services and accommodations to meet their unique needs. For increased visibility of trained staff, we suggest coordinating a physical or digital badge that allows RAs to share their accomplishment and ASD-specific training with other residential staff and students. Lastly, it is important to provide sources of ongoing, current information to residential staff, which could be done through campus speaker events on ASD, for example. Morever, many postsecondary institutions rely on student disability services as the primary source of accommodations for students with disabilities. Given the number of RAs in this study who reported not understanding the role of student disability services, it may be important for future trainings to collaborate with disability support personnel to ensure that RAs are aware that they exist and are accessible. One way to involve disability support staff is to dedicate a portion of the workshop to identifying and explaining their role with regard to legal obligations, disability registration process, and available accommodations.

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Table 1

Summary Responses to Likert-Scale Items on the Pre-Training Survey

	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree (%)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (%)	Strongly Agree/ Agree (%)
I am knowledgeable about ASD.	36.9	26.1	37.0
Students with ASD should disclose their disability to student disability services.	15.2	34.8	50.0
Students with ASD should have access to services/ accommodations on university campuses.	0.0	2.2	97.8
Student disability services are accessible to RAs.	6.5	28.3	56.2
I understand the role of student disability services.	15.2	17.4	67.4
College students with ASD who do not appear to have difficulties or who do not appear to have autism symptoms do not need any additional accommodations or supports in Residential Halls/Campus Apartments.	63.1	28.3	8.7
I feel comfortable having college students with ASD in my Residential Hall/Campus Apartments.	8.7	15.2	76.1
I am confident supporting students with ASD.	30.4	26.1	43.4
College students with autism should be expected to interact with other students in my Residential Hall/Campus Apartments.	37	28.3	34.8
I believe RAs should take a role in supporting students with ASD.	2.2	4.3	93.5
I think a training program would be useful in helping me work with college students with ASD.	6.5	4.3	89.1

Table 2

Responses to True/False ASD Knowledge Items on the Pre-Training Survey

Survey Items	Responses	
	True (%)	False (%)
People with autism are disinterested in making friends.	2.2	97.8
Autism is caused by vaccines.	0.0	100.0
Children with autism can grow up, go to college, and marry.	100.0	0.0
The majority of people with autism have low intelligence.	2.2	97.8

Table 3

Workshop Curriculum

- Welcome and introductions
- PowerPoint presentation
  - Presentation overview
  - Common autism myths
  - What is autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?
    - Symptoms of ASD: Social and communication difficulties
    - Symptoms of ASD: Restricted interests/Repetitive behaviors
    - Causes of ASD
    - Prevalence of ASD
  - Transition to adulthood
    - Outcomes for adults with ASD
    - Statistics on education and employment
    - Challenges
  - Social support for students with ASD
    - Social deficits among young adults with ASD
    - Importance of friendships
    - Impact of peer rejection
  - Strategies to assist students with ASD
    - Social integration
    - Peer mentors
    - Accessing resources
    - Teaching evidence-based social skills: PEERS®
      - Role-play videos[a]
      - Didactic questioning
      - Resources
  - Summary slide
  - Autism Goes to College documentary trailer[b]
  - Contact information
  - Group discussion

Note. [a]PEERS® role-play videos can be found on the following website: https://www.semel.ucla.edu/peers/resources/role-play-videos; [b]The Autism Goes to College trailer can be found at the following website: www.autismgoestocollege.org

Table 4

Summary Responses to Likert-Scale Items on the Post-Training Survey

Survey Items	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree (%)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (%)	Strongly Agree/ Agree (%)
I found this training helpful.	0.0	4.4	95.6
I know more about autism after this training.	2.2	8.9	88.9
As a result of taking this training, I feel prepared to support students with autism who live in my residential hall.	4.4	8.9	88.9
As a result of taking this training, I have an increased interest in learning how to access support for students with autism.	4.4	11.1	84.5