



## The Academic Adjustments of First-Year Students with Autism

**Wanda Hadley** (Corresponding Author)

Western Michigan University, Michigan

Email: [wanda.hadley@wmich.edu](mailto:wanda.hadley@wmich.edu)

**Yuqian Zhang**

Western Michigan University, Michigan

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### Abstract

Students with learning disabilities, specifically those with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) transitioning from high school to college might face barriers to their academic participation. Seamless access on campus for students with ASD should be a priority that includes accommodations, a culture that is inclusive, and faculty that understand the issues related to having students with ASD in the classroom. This study reviews the experiences of the same group of entering first-year students with ASD over a two-year period as they adjust to the transition to college. Students struggled to move away from accommodations such as tutoring, extra time for exams, and proctored exams as they had received in high school.

**Keywords:** Autism spectrum disorder (ASD); Learning disabilities; First-year college students; Education; Transitioning.

### 1. Introduction

Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are a sub-group of students with learning disabilities that are continuing to enroll in postsecondary education (Shmulsky *et al.*, 2015) particularly liberal arts colleges and universities. Their transition from secondary to postsecondary education is compelling because while in K-12 schools, students with ASD are provided services unique to their learning disability as mandated by the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004). Once students transition to colleges and universities the academic supports related to their learning disability is mandated by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 (Hadley, 2009). The IDEIA of 2004 requires secondary schools to provide special education programs that focus on remediation and addresses learning styles. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 states that universities should not discriminate and requires colleges and universities to provide a limited amount of services. Postsecondary institutions, however, are not mandated to offer the level of services students experience in K-12. Students with learning disabilities such as ASD will be in inclusive classrooms with other students who do not have ASD and expected to compete academically.

Although students with ASD are transitioning into colleges and universities at a growing rate, (Brown and Coomes, 2016) asserted that the majority of this student population start out at community colleges. Also when students do arrive at four-year institutions, those institutions report concern about their preparedness to assist this student population (Hart *et al.*, 2010). While most colleges and universities have some level of academic support services for students with ASD, it is the student's responsibility to self-identify and self-advocate for services. They are expected to contact the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) and meet with the Coordinator of Disability Services (CDS) to discuss their needs related to the ASD diagnosis and request academic accommodations. Once the student discloses their disability, it is the institution's responsibility to provide reasonable accommodations. Identifying to the CDS establishes a connection to the university and a confidential advocate to help overcome possible institutional barriers (Evans *et al.*, 2017). Kaplin *et al.* (2020), wrote that unless the institution has knowledge of the student's disability, there is no responsibility to accommodate under the mandate of the ADA. They further noted that students requesting services must provide relevant documentation from a qualified medical provider. Evans *et al.* (2017), added that the student's limitation(s) related to the diagnosis must be outlined within the medical report.

### 2. Related Literature

Many students arrive on campus with multifaceted issues that can challenge their academic success including students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Osterholt and Dennis, 2014). Obstacles to students with ASD academic achievements are complex and it is important to understand the student and their needs. Students diagnosed with ASD show difficulty with general communication skills, academic skill deficit, and the inability to

advocate for themselves (Hammond, 2014). ASD diagnosis have impact on the student's self-identity and so does the university's structures and resources. In transitioning to college students with ASD should think about the size and type of institution they might be interested in attending. Also the importance of self-disclosing one's disability and the necessary classroom accommodations they will need should be things they are considering. According to Lechtenberger *et al.* (2012) students with learning disabilities defined a common institutional barrier as a lack of understanding and support by faculty and administrators. In the classroom students with ASD may have difficulties with comprehension, which may mean following directions and engaging in lengthy discussions. Because students with ASD prefer routine they may seem inflexible if classroom activities are changed in any way.

ASD is consider a serious developmental diagnosis that can impact every aspect of a student's life and be so severe that the student is unable to communicate. Students might have ongoing social problems associated with interrelating with others and limited interests (Jackson *et al.*, 2018). Signs of ASD are usually detected early in the student's developmental stages and impacts the student's ability to function socially in school, through their work life and other relationships in life. Further students oftentimes have high IQ levels but have difficulty interpreting emotions, nonverbal behaviors and passive language. Because of these issues, students with ASD could have extensive struggles in their transition to higher education. It has been frequently found that students with ASD have other co-morbid disorders such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, bipolar disorder and anxiety disorder. In adulthood individuals with ASD tend to be underemployed and undereducated (Wei *et al.*, 2016).

## 2.1. Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this research is to share the lived experiences of a group of first-year students with ASD's transition and adjustment to the collegiate experience. Although there has been quite a bit of research conducted about college-age students with ASD, there needs to be more research about their transition to college (Adreon and Durocher, 2007; Hammond, 2014). The study follows the students over a two-year period in which they participate in a series of focus group and semi-structured individual interview sessions.

Individual development of college students involves the accomplishment of a series of developmental tasks (Chickering, 1969; Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Mastering these tasks is a process and specific conditions in the college environment influences that process. Learning difficulties is also a major factor in student development (Hadley, 2009), as students with ASD must work harder than others to address the academic challenges and social changes unique to the college experience. This study explores the academic transition of students with ASD to college in three specific vectors: developing competence, managing emotions, and developing autonomy. *Developing competence* has to do with the student's ability to obtain the necessary academic skills to successfully complete college work. *Managing emotions* relates to the student responding appropriately to challenging situations. *Developing autonomy* reviews the student's testing various levels of independence such as moving away from academic supports they had used while in high school.

## 2.2. Method

This two-year phenomenological study was conducted at a private, selective, coeducational college in the Midwest. Phenomenological studies search out the essence or basic structure of a phenomenon (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This study collects data from a group of first-year students with ASD in their transition and adjustment to the collegiate experience, and develops a description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals over a two year period (Cresswell and Poth, 2018).

## 2.3. Participants and Sampling Procedures

Over the course of two academic years, a group of 10 students that were diagnosed with a learning disability and ASD participated in a series of focus group and semi-structured individual interviews. An invitation letter developed by the researcher inviting students to participate in the study was mailed out by the campus Director of the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) to the students. The students had to meet the criteria of entering that university right out of high school and submitted test results identifying their learning disability. The first 10 students who responded to the letter and met the specific research requirements were interviewed and chosen by the researcher to participate in the study. Cresswell and Poth (2018), recommend at least 10 participants in a phenomenology study. The students represented all four of the academic units on campus: arts and sciences, business, education, and engineering. Participants included 8 females and 2 males. Table 1 lists the student participant demographic data.

**Table-1.** Student Participant Demographic Data

<i>Student Name</i>	<i>College/School</i>	<i>Major/Minor</i>
Ali	Business	Marketing
Ann Marie	Arts & Sciences	Undeclared
Christine	Business	Marketing
Emily	Business	Marketing
Jennifer	Education	Elementary
Laura	Education	Elementary
Matt	Business	Management
Mike	Engineering	Mechanical
Molly	Arts & Sciences	Undeclared
Rachel	Arts & Sciences	Undeclared

## 2.4. Data Collection

For two academic years, the 10 students participated in focus group and semi-structured individual interviews where they discussed their experiences transitioning to a college campus and adjusting to college academic expectations. Focus group interviews were two hours long and the semi-structured individual interviews were one hour long and both were audio-taped. Focus groups give students an opportunity to hear how their experiences compare to their peers (Vagle, 2014). Using students’ actual words is an effective technique to bolster the credibility of a study (Marshall and Rossman, 2016).

The interview protocol of this study covers questions on *what* the participants experienced and *how* they experienced it (Jacob and Furgerson, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). A description of *what* the participants experienced with transition to college is a textural description of the experience, while a description of *how* the experience happened is a structural description, which focuses on the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced. This protocol fits the semi-structured interview, which is the middle ground between structured and unstructured (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This type of format assumes that individual respondents define the world in unique ways, and interview questions thus need to be more open-ended. This interview protocol also fits phenomenological interviewing, by which the researcher attempts to uncover the essence of an individual’s “lived” experience (Seidman, 2013). Such an interview “focuses on the deep, lived meanings that events have for individuals, assuming that these meanings guide actions and interactions (Marshall and Rossman, 2016).

Tables 2 list the research questions asked in focus group interview session 1 during spring semester of the student’s first year. That focus group interview had to do with the students’ *developing competence*. Table 3 shows the research questions asked in the semi-structured individual interviews that have to do with the student’s *managing emotions*. Those individual interviews sessions were conducted during the students’ fall semester of their sophomore year. In Table 4 are the research questions asked in the second focus group interview during the student’s spring semester of their sophomore year.

Table-2. Research Questions Asked in Focus Group Interview #1

<i>Developing Competence</i>	
1.	How competent do you feel in your role as a college student?
2.	How has your sense of competence changed since you were a first-year student?
3.	What do you think contributed to this change?

Table-3. Research Questions Asked in Semi-Structured Interviews

<i>Managing Emotions</i>	
1.	What are some of the emotions you experience, both pleasant and unpleasant, related to your role as a college student?
2.	When do these feelings emerge: What seems to prompt them?
3.	What do you do with or what do you do about these feelings?
4.	How well do you feel you manage your emotions?
5.	Which emotions do you wish you would manage better?
6.	What is there about the way you manage them that you wish you would change?

Table-4. Research Questions Asked in Focus Group Interview

<i>Developing Autonomy</i>	
1.	How able do you feel to make decisions on your own and to manage your own life as a college student?
2.	How has your sense of autonomy changed since you were a first-year student?
3.	What do you think contributed to this change?

## 2.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis is a complex process of interaction in which one moves between seeing the big picture – the “forest”, and the particulars – the “trees” (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The researcher started with the *what* and *how* questions from the interview protocol to reduce codes to themes (Cresswell and Poth, 2018). Some salient categories and themes quickly came up, but others were less straightforward. This study followed the approach for phenomenological analysis and representation discussed by Moustakas (1994):

- Describe personal experiences with the phenomenon under study.
- Develop a list of significant statements.
- Group the significant statements into broader units of information.
- Create a description of “what” the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon.
- Draft a description of “how” the experience happened.
- Write a composite description of the phenomenon.

## 2.6. Methodological Integrity

This study uses triangulation to address its internal validity (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Through multiple methods of data collection, what a participant says in an interview can be checked against what is observed or what is recorded in documents relevant to the phenomenon of interest. Triangulation using multiple sources of data means

comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different times or in different places, or interview data collected from students with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same students.

The second strategy this study uses is member check by soliciting feedback on the transcript and preliminary or emerging findings from the students that are interviewed (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). A third strategy is adequate engagement in data collection by getting as close as possible to participants' understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Developing Competence

The initial focus group interview addressed Hadley (2009), Chickering and Reisser (1993) and Chickering (1969) domain of *developing competence* which has to do with the student acquiring and applying the necessary academic skills to be successful. This focus group interview was conducted spring semester of the students' first year in college. In response to the researcher, the focus group began by the students introducing themselves and why they are interested in supporting this research inquiry. A number of the students, share that they are interested in helping the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) to hire more staff and several of the students say they want to help students with learning and other disabilities to have a good experience on campus. Afterwards, at the prompting of the researcher, students discuss a little about themselves such as their major, why the interest in a specific major, their courses and what actual supports and accommodations they had received through OSD.

As we move into the focus group questions, the students as a group agree that the college tutoring system is a challenge for them. Laura, an Education major, says that she went to a Catholic High School that did not provide any services for her, but she had a "personal" tutor that her parents hired to work with her. She complains that when she goes to the writing center, for example, each time she gets a different tutor and she has to explain her issues again. Ann, an Arts and Sciences major, says that she always had a tutor for math in high school, but she has not taken any math classes yet while in college. Molly, an Arts and Sciences major, says she too had tutors in high school, but so far in college, her professors "like help you for the most part." Molly further shares that when she visited the college, the coordinator of OSD discussed with her and parents what services would be available, so she knew tutoring services would be offered by upper-class students. Jennifer, an Education major, describes her academic adjustment from high school to college during her first semester as "overwhelming!" Now in her second semester she goes on to say "I think I have adjusted to it." But she also says, "I did better first semester than I am now." As a group, the students spend quite a bit of time discussing their writing concerns and the help they need. Mike, an Engineering major, and Laura, an Education major, describe the OSD services as "not enough!" Laura says last semester she really struggled, but this semester her teachers have been really helpful.

#### 3.2. Managing Emotions

The outline for the semi-structured individual interviews was Hadley (2009), Chickering and Reisser (1993) and Chickering (1969) domain of *managing emotions* which accounts for the way students respond to unexpected situations and their ability to self-regulate. The semi-structured individual interviews happened the fall semester of the student's sophomore year. Several of the students seem a bit upset when they discuss the level of support offered through OSD. Ali, a Business major, says "I was led to believe I would get more help." But she did not find her History tutor to be very helpful. In responding to a question about this being the best school choice for her, Molly, an Arts and Sciences major, says "I think I would have understood better what was available to me." Mike, an Engineering major, shares that when he visited the school he got the impression that a "professional note-taker" would go to the class take notes and afterwards sit and talk with him about the class. He says what actually happens is on the first day of the class that he wants notes, he has to go up to a student in the class and ask them to take notes for him. He seems frustrated when he says "you have to hope that you have somebody that is going to show up to the classes, take good notes in legible handwriting." Molly adds that she misses her parents prodding her along and making sure she was getting things done. Jennifer, an Education major, says that in her high school, students with learning disabilities were in the same classroom with their peers without learning disabilities. Emily, a Business major, says that she did not use tutoring a lot in high school because she usually asked her teachers for help and/or her mom and dad. She shares that while in college she has used "proctoring for exams" more than tutors.

#### 3.3. Developing Autonomy

The domain of Hadley (2009), Chickering and Reisser (1993) and Chickering (1969) *developing autonomy* was the context for the second focus group interview which assesses the student's participation in his/her learning process. Students participated in the second focus group interview during the spring semester of their sophomore year. In discussing becoming more independent and self-sufficient, the students still seem to struggle with this stage of development. The students as a group admit that they can still "get worked up," "stressed out" and "freaked out" when it feels that assignments are coming at them all at once. Emily, a Business major, confesses that she sometimes will call her parents for help with homework or someone in her residence hall that she knows is in the class or has had the class. She says it is easier to ask for help from people you know. She shares that it is ok for the OSD staff and her professors to know about her learning disability, but she does not want her classmates to know. Molly, an Arts and Sciences major, agrees with Emily that if she feels unclear about an assignment or question in class she still feels the need to ask a classmate to clarify her understanding of things rather than count on her own understanding. She says she sometimes hesitates to talk with her professors because she does not want them to think she is not smart

like the other students. Matt, a Business major, added that he did not get a lot of accommodations in high school because his teachers did not seem very inform about learning disabilities. He says, however, since coming to college he uses pretty much everything that is available through OSD.

## 4. Discussion

In this study, a group of ten self-identified first-year students with ASD participated in a series of focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews over a two-year period. The group of students in the study came to the university with a background of extensive use of accommodations and supports for their learning disabilities. Possibly because of self-understanding, prior use, and/or motivation, their desire for accommodations continued into their second year of college. Of the possible accommodations students were most vocal about was the student managed center model for “tutoring support.” Students missed and wanted more individual help as they had while in high school. Defeo *et al.* (2017), describes the drop-in peer tutoring model as prevalent on college campuses. They go on to say, however, that students will spend most of their time without the assistance of a tutor. The students in the study did express concern that the tutors might not have the content knowledge but also about the lack of privacy in tutoring centers. The students expressed a desire to have more discrete tutoring sessions and specific tutors assigned to them. At times, the students talked about the tutors as if they were also mentors helping them navigate the college environment.

The students seem to attribute “tutoring” support as essential in their movement toward successful transition to college. Osterholt and Dennis (2014), assert that students that lack course content mastery might need experiences that support building content knowledge. If students are not confident in their academic skill set, one-on-one tutoring support might help them better break down specific tasks. Professors can develop small peer group activities in their classes to mock tutoring sessions. Osterholt and Dennis (2014), describe such a classroom setting as a safe environment for students with ASD who are not as socially assertive to speak up. Students with ASD experience difficulties in communication and social interactions that could influence their performance in the courses. Because of their lack of social readiness, students with ASD might not recognize the importance of registering for classes by a schedule time. Transitioning to college involves new arrangements, new systems, and new services. Students with ASD are expected to assume the main role for coordination of his/her academic needs in college and will need to request accommodations. Even though these students might be uncomfortable and/or unprepared to discuss their academic needs, as they exist high school they should be encouraged to do so.

## 5. Conclusion

As more students with ASD seek to earn a college degree, they are vulnerable to leaving college early, so understanding the obstacles to their academic success and providing requested supports will be key to their transition to campus. Students with ASD, might not have acquired the self-regulation and executive functioning skills needed to be successful early on in their transition to college. As colleges and universities accept this special population, there needs to be campus staff to provide assessments, and planning and interventions between high schools and universities. It is incumbent on the university personnel to understand ASD and the specific challenges students might bring to the campus culture.

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