How Do We Help?
Academic Libraries and Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Gerard Shea and Sebastian Derry*

Introduction
According to a report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,¹ 1 in 59 children in the United States has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). ASD is a neurological and developmental disorder “that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges.”² The American Psychiatric Association defines ASD as “persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts.”³ Other characteristics students with ASD might display are deficits in understanding and using body language, difficulty having a conversation and making eye contact, and repetitive and restrictive behaviors, activities and interests.

As a result of the increased prevalence of ASD, a larger number of higher functioning ASD students are now participating in higher education. In the United States approximately 550,000 children with ASD will become adults in the next ten years and is predicted that 45% of this group will enroll in some form of postsecondary education.⁴ A key question is the degree to which the increase in the number of college-aged students with ASD will impact academic libraries.

The transition into college is potentially difficult for students with ASD and campus support services, while necessary to help make this transition successful, are often lacking. According to the research literature, services at institutions of higher education do not adequately address the supports needed to help students with ASD thrive in college. In this paper, we intend to focus on what academic libraries can do to help students with ASD make this transition and succeed in college.

Although some people with ASD prefer to use the term autistic. Throughout this paper we will use the term autism spectrum disorder. We have decided to use the term ASD to be consistent with current standards in the literature.

Literature Review
There is limited research literature describing how college students with ASD experience academic libraries. Furthermore, research characterizing the perceptions of students with ASD regarding their overall college experience is extremely limited. In 2014, Gelbar, Smith, and Reichow conducted a systematic review of the literature and found only 20 studies describing the experiences of 69 college students with ASD. In 2017, Anderson, Stephenson, and Carter did a systematic literature review of the experiences and supports for students with ASD in post-secondary education and located 23 studies on the topic. Additionally, most of the literature focuses on the experiences or perceptions of parents, faculty, and administrators and not college students with ASD themselves. There is also a lack of research on effective supports for college students with ASD.⁵

---

* Gerard Shea, Communication Librarian, University Libraries, Seton Hall University, gerard.shea@shu.edu. Sebastian Derry, Assistant Dean for Public Services, University Libraries, Seton Hall University, sebastian.derry@shu.edu
Anderson surveyed college students with ASD about their experiences in academic libraries. The purpose of this study was to allow for students with ASD to share their experiences in their own words. According to Anderson, this study is one of the first to explore the perceptions of students with ASD about academic libraries. Anderson used Wrong Planet (https://wrongplanet.net/), a web community of over 80,000 registered users for individuals with autism and other neurological differences. Through her examination of discussion boards Anderson focused on those discussions where users described their experiences with academic libraries. Anderson used qualitative content analysis to analyze discussions by college students with ASD about their experiences in academic libraries. Anderson utilized qualitative content analysis because it has been successfully used to study online communications. The study used the social model of disability. “The social model of disability focuses on disability as being located in society rather than the individual.”

Van Hees, Moyson, and Roeyers examined how universities and colleges could best support students with ASD. They “were interested in the experiences from the students’ own frame of reference.” Using a qualitative research design, they collected data through semi-structured interviews which gave the students the opportunity to “speak freely about their experiences.” The principles of grounded theory were used for data analysis.

Cho, a librarian from Adelphi University, described his experience providing services to students with ASD at Adelphi. According to Cho, Adelphi is attempting to become a “student-ready college.” The student-ready approach means colleges and universities accept students at their current academic level and help them to develop the skills needed to become successful students. This is opposed to the “college-ready” approach which means that higher education is an exclusive environment where only students who meet certain admission standards are accepted. To help make this student-ready approach successful, Adelphi University developed the Bridges to Adelphi Program. The Bridges to Adelphi Program helps students with ASD make the transition from high school to college. Cho provides strategies for working with ASD students based on his experience working with these students as part of The Bridges to Adelphi Program.

In 2014, Remy and Seaman provided recommendations for librarians working with people with ASD. These recommendations included personal librarian programs for students with ASD, instructional strategies for the classroom and the reference desk, increasing awareness about ASD through various outreach initiatives such as sponsoring events for Autism Awareness month in April, and highlighting library materials on ASD. Additionally, they suggested chat reference might benefit college students with ASD who are uncomfortable with in-person interactions with librarians.

Lawrence, a doctoral candidate in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and self-advocate for the Autistic, examined the topic of neurodiversity. Neurodiversity is a concept supported by some psychologists and sociologists who argue that “there is no ‘normal’ way for the brain to function.” Lawrence believes that neurological differences such as ASD are best understood as normal human variation. She also believes that there is lack of knowledge about the concept in the library profession. In her article, she provides examples of how librarians might approach the issues surrounding neurodiversity.

Pionke conducted a survey of functionally diverse students (i.e. students with disabilities) including students with ASD, at a large research university in the fall of 2015. Pionke interviewed eight students over a period of three weeks. The study used open ended questions and focused on what the students thought about the library based on their disability. Suggestions for improving the library both physically and online were “highly encouraged.” The students with ASD and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) agreed that the library book stacks were “intimidating and scary” and all the students interviewed saw the library as “safe place.”
The service mission of academic libraries and libraries in general requires that we create inclusive environments for students with ASD. According to Article I of the American Library Association (ALA) Code of Ethics: “We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources, equitable service policies, equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.” Additionally, many people with ASD see the library as a safe place. If the library truly is a safe place for students with ASD, providing relevant services for these students could help them succeed in college.

Students with ASD have the cognitive ability to succeed academically in college, but they struggle because they lack the academic and social skills. A review of the literature indicates that services at academic libraries are not adequate to address the needs of college students with ASD. In the discipline of library science, there is not much research on young adults or college students with ASD and there are few studies that examine this population. Pionke’s survey revealed that while functionally diverse students had positive interactions with library employees, they “expressed a deep frustration with the clear lack of training and sensitivity regarding interacting and assisting people with disabilities.”

Academic libraries do not exist in a vacuum; services at institutions of higher learning in general do not currently address the range of supports necessary to help college students with ASD deal with their needs. Consequently, many students with ASD are not successful in college due to the lack of available services and relevant supports. Additionally, lack of individual support results in lower postsecondary achievement in all areas for college students with ASD, when compared to their peers with other disabilities.

Based on the research literature, services at institutions of higher education do not address the many supports needed to help college students with ASD. Students with ASD reported a lack of knowledge about ASD among faculty and counselors. Additionally, campus Disability Support Services (DSS) offices lack information on ASD. Libraries can collaborate with DSS offices to provide training and resources for faculty and the campus community. Libraries can also promote ASD awareness through collaborative programming, workshops, lectures, and discussions.

These students have the potential to be successful and productive members of society. However, reaching this potential may be hindered by the academic and social demands of college. One of the suggestions that have been made to support ASD students is providing a quiet space on campus that is available 24 hours a day. Libraries could be the location where these spaces are provided. Another suggestion to help ASD students succeed is to encourage these students to tutor other students in areas in which they have expertise. This is another area where libraries could contribute by providing the space for tutoring. Efforts to promote libraries as safe places for ASD students to meet, study, and collaborate with other members of the campus community.

As Cho points out, before discussing strategies librarians can use when instructing students with ASD, it is important to understand that the context in which academic librarians interact with students is different from teaching faculty. Academic librarians usually see students in one-shot library instruction sessions, research consultations, and at the reference desk. Most of these interactions are not regularly scheduled and occur intermittently throughout the semester. Consequently, it is difficult for librarians to develop individual relationships with students.

Recommendations
It is important to remember, college students with ASD have the intellectual ability to succeed as students. However, this potential may be unrealized because of challenges in “meeting the more basic academic and social demands of college.” Additionally, “individuals with autism spectrum disorder are successful in life when
their educational team, family, and community services providers collaborate to plan early, consider the person through person-centered planning, and match the educational curriculum to the person's needs.

**Awareness**

An important first step for any librarian who wants to work successfully with students with ASD is to learn about the disorder. There are many resources available to learn about the characteristics of ASD and how they might manifest themselves in college students. Librarians can learn on their own by reading the research literature on the topic. They can also consult faculty on campus who are experts in ASD education.

**Campus Outreach**

Another way librarians can support students with ASD is through campus outreach initiatives. One example would be creating a research guide that provides information about ASD and resources that could help students and faculty do research on the topic. At Seton Hall University we have created an Autism Awareness guide and collaborated with faculty in the College of Education and Human Services to have the guide linked in the online course shell for their course on autism and developmental disabilities. We are also available to consult with the students taking the course if they need help finding resources on ASD.

Librarians can also collaborate with Disability Support Services (DSS) offices and other agencies on campus to provide training for librarians and library staff. This March at Seton Hall, University Libraries will work with the DSS office and Counseling Center to provide a training session for librarians and library staff on working with students on the autism spectrum. Additionally, librarians can plan events to raise awareness about ASD on campus. Outreach initiatives like these are crucial because students reported a lack of understanding about ASD among faculty and staff and “without a high-level of knowledge, support services were unlikely to function successfully.” Furthermore, students suggested an awareness program could help eliminate “the perceived stigma and could at the same time highlight the talents of students with ASD.”

**Quiet Spaces**

A theme that appears often in the literature is the concept of the library as a safe haven. According to Pionke, safety is an important issue for students with ASD and PTSD. Quiet spaces in the library could be one way to provide a sense of safety for these students. Additionally, students with ASD often suffer from sensory overload and a quiet place in the library could help these students decompress.

**Tutors**

People with ASD often have strong interests in one narrowly focused area. They also often lack the social skills to develop meaningful relationships with other college students. One way to help integrate students with ASD into the social fabric of college life might be by providing space in the library for these students to tutor other students in their areas of expertise. This kind of initiative could help students with ASD become more comfortable and accepted in social situations.

**Chat Reference**

Another way to help students with ASD, who struggle with social communication, might be through chat reference. Remy and Seaman point out that students with ASD may not be comfortable with “face-to-face” contact with a librarian. Chat reference could circumvent these potentially awkward interactions between ASD students and librarians.
Personal Librarians

Based on the literature, students with ASD believe a personalized approach is an effective way to address their needs. In fact, students with ASD prefer “individual coaching to training programs.” Implementing a personal librarian program would be a way to address this preference for personalized support. Individually focused services is a good way to help students with ASD succeed in school and as citizens.

Additionally, college life can be less structured than it is in high school and people with ASD are often more comfortable following set routines. Consequently, the lack of structure in college may be a challenge for ASD students. To address this desire for structure, a personal librarian could teach students how to improve both their research skills and time management skills. After all time management is a necessary skill for conducting research.

Information Literacy Instruction

Universal design of learning (UDL) might be a good approach for academic librarians to take when instructing students with ASD. According to Remy and Seaman, “the universal design of learning approach seeks to design products and environments that are maximally usable for all and eliminate the need for further adaptation or specialized design.” UDL is derived from an architectural concept that buildings should be designed to be accessible to all individuals, including those with disabilities. The UDL approach will help all students not just those with ASD or other disabilities.

A strategy that could be effective for students with ASD is teaching concrete skills by designing lectures around specific goals. Librarians can create hands-on exercises to reinforce the skills they want students to learn. These same exercises can be used to assess whether students have acquired the skills taught in the instruction session. A goal-based, more interactive approach should be more effective than a lecture centered approach because students with ASD sometimes struggle with abstract or ambiguous concepts.

Evaluating information is a difficult skill for students with ASD to master because of their struggles with abstract ideas. To teach students how to evaluate information, a librarian could provide students with an article that is not reliable or authoritative and another article that is reliable and authoritative. The librarian could then take the students through the exercise of evaluating the article. After doing that two more articles could be given to the students so that they could evaluate the articles on their own as a hands-on exercise.

Interacting with Individual Students

It is important to remember while students with ASD share common characteristics, “each student is an individual with his or her own strengths, needs and challenges.” An example of this is from Adelphi where a student went to the reference desk to get research assistance for a paper in an anthropology course. The student would not communicate verbally with the reference librarian. Instead of speaking the student wrote an illegible note on a piece of paper. The reference librarian was able to encourage the student to start speaking and the student disclosed she was in the Bridges to Adelphi program. The librarian contacted the student’s professor and learned that the student needed encouragement to speak. The student was assisted with her research through a combination of written and verbal communication. This example displays how individual students have different ways of communicating and learning. Librarians need to adapt their methods to fit the needs of each student.

In another example from Adelphi, a student who had problems with the writing center decided to contact the library to get help on a research paper instead of going back to the writing center. The student scheduled two research appointments, but he did not show for either one. This behavior displays how students with ASD struggle with time management. He did attend the third meeting and he received assistance on how to create
a bibliography and how to cite. The student was asked to make corrections to his paper. However, the student returned the paper without making any of the suggested corrections. The librarian reacted by sending a “terse and impatient” email suggesting that the student should not seek more help if he was not willing to complete the work on his paper. The student did not respond to this email and another attempt to contact him was also unsuccessful. Students with ASD “feel rejection more than mainstream students as a result of their anxiety, insecurity, and hyper-sensitivity.” The librarian used this interaction as learning experience and it helped him in his future dealings with ASD students.

As Cho points out, patience and encouragement goes a long way when helping students with ASD. We have seen the same thing here at Seton Hall. One of our librarians has worked patiently and conscientiously at the reference desk with a student who displays characteristics consistent with ASD. As a result of her hard work that student has gone from being almost completely dependent on the librarian's assistance to being nearly independent. When he first started with the librarian, he would not even type in his own search terms, she would do it for him. He is now at the point where he can not only type and determine his own search terms, but he also has a good grasp of how to use the search limiters in our databases. Additionally, he is making progress in developing good research questions and socially he is becoming more comfortable working with other librarians at the reference desk and with his peers on research projects. Our librarian said, “it was very rewarding to experience him working with two of his peers, exchanging ideas and giving and accepting help in equal measure.”

Future Research
Currently, there is a gap in the literature on the experiences of students with ASD in academic libraries. Previous researchers have highlighted the need to do more in-depth research on the perceptions and experiences that people with disabilities have about library services. Anderson recommends conducting research that allows students with ASD to provide their experiences in their own words. She also suggests that these studies should be guided by the social model of disability.

In the spirit of empowering students to tell their own stories, we plan to study the experiences of Seton Hall students with ASD at Walsh Library so that we can understand their needs and provide relevant library services as a result. Hopefully, these new, more relevant services will play a small role in helping these students succeed in college. Additionally, administering this survey to students with ASD about their needs pertaining to libraries and library services could be a much-needed impetus to drive further research.

Endnotes
44. Cho, “Building Bridges,” 335.

Bibliography


