Support Systems for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder during their Transition to Higher Education: A Qualitative Analysis of Online Discussions

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Abstract

This study explored how college students with autism identify and use support systems during the transition to higher education. This study explored how these students described their experiences within an online environment among their peers. The study used unobtrusive qualitative methods to collect and analyze data from online forum discussion posts from Wrong Planet, an online forum for people with autism. Students found their support systems in various ways. Many report using services provided by their Office of Disability Services, but students must be aware that these services exist first, and often must have a diagnosis to receive such supports. This study makes suggestions for higher education institutions to identify and promote their support services, both those that are accessible through Offices of Disability Services, and those that are available without diagnosis or disclosure.

Research Questions

How do students with ASD describe their experiences with support systems during their transition to college?
- Who or what are the support systems that college students with ASD describe?
- How do college students with ASD find these support systems?
- What do these support systems do, according to college students with ASD?
- What are the outcomes that students associate with these support systems?

Methods

Discussion board conversations, or threads, were collected from Wrong Planet if they fell within the following inclusion criteria:
- between 1/1/2012 and 12/31/2013
- included on the "education" forum
- included at least 5 total posts
- included keywords within the initial post or title (e.g. starting college; finishing high school; dorm)

The selected discussion board threads were imported into NVivo, and coded by a group of researchers. The research team ensured inter-coder reliability by coding some of the same documents and comparing results before any independent coding took place.

Initial codes were assigned within an *a priori* coding scheme, using the Inputs-Environments/Experiences-Outcomes (IEO) framework (Astin, 1991).

Coping In Life	Total Posts	Total Threads
Parents' Discussion This forum is for discussing the various issues related to parenting children with Asperger's Syndrome and Autism.	117,416 posts	8,676 threads
Love and Dating Whether you're a smooth-talking Adonis or a lonely heart, this forum can be used for discussing relationships and romance.	408,140 posts	15,488 threads
The Haven For those times when you're feeling blue and need to get a little help from your friends. Discuss all those issues that are not covered by the other forums in the Coping in life category.	200,779 posts	13,894 threads
Social Skills and Making Friends Having Autism means you may not have great social skills, but that doesn't mean you can't learn them! Discuss friendship and social skills here!	106,607 posts	8,818 threads
School and College Life How is life at school? Talk about anything from grades, to classmates to your favorite subjects. Whether you dislike or enjoy school this is for you.	48,114 posts	4,588 threads
Work and finding a Job When you grow up you'll be put in a container called a cubicle. The bleak oppressiveness will warp your spine and destroy your capacity to feel joy. Luckily you'll have a boss like me to motivate you with something called fear. Discuss work and your job in this forum!	49,641 posts	5,215 threads

Inputs	• Expectations after K12 • College Destination
Environments / Experiences	• Academics • Peer Interaction
Outcomes	• Academic Achievement • Occupational Success • Personal Well-Being

Discussion

The students clearly believe that the burden is on them to seek help. Whether by registering with the disability services office, or searching the school's website, or by otherwise exploring what the college or university has to offer, these students describe it as being up to them to discover their own support systems. The students on Wrong Planet describe actively seeking their supports and sometimes not even being aware that formal institutional supports exist. Nonetheless, many students were quick to describe the Office of Disability Services as a strong source of support.

Some students on describe not having a formal diagnosis, despite displaying characteristics of the disorder. In these cases, people describe seeking help on campus in places other than the Offices of Disability Services, such as with academic advisors or counselors available to all students. This provides more evidence for the argument that **college campuses should create inclusive environments that are supportive to students with ASD regardless of diagnosis or services provided by disability services offices** (Zager & Alpern, 2010). Also, this reinforces the idea that training and education should be made available for all departments (Barnhill, 2014), as some students with ASD, perhaps because they are not officially diagnosed, will seek help from departments other than the disability services offices.

Academic success and support systems are rarely coded together within this data set…perhaps these students in Wrong Planet were not generally "successful" in college. Perhaps the support they received was not entirely helpful. More optimistically, perhaps the value of these support systems was so abstract or pervasive or indirect that students simply couldn't isolate their effects. Regardless, it should be noted that this study is specifically looking at the transition to college so a more complete look at data about student outcomes would likely generate more information here.

Support Systems for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder during Their Transition to Higher Education

A Qualitative Analysis of Online Discussion

By Amelia Anderson

Background:

Individuals with high functioning autism spectrum disorder (ASD), formerly diagnosed as Asperger syndrome, are graduating from high school and entering institutions of higher education (IHE) in greater numbers than ever before. Transitioning from high school to college can be challenging for all students, and can be particularly difficult for students with ASD, who often face adversity during periods of transition. Although a growing number of colleges and universities have begun developing programs to support these students, more efforts are necessary to better understand how to best serve this population. Further, much of the relevant literature relies on secondhand reporting from parents, faculty, and administration rather than the student with ASD him or herself.

Objectives:

This study is an exploration into how college students with high functioning autism spectrum disorder describe their support systems during the transition to higher education. In particular, this study explores how these students describe their experiences within an online environment among their peers.

Methods:

The study used unobtrusive qualitative methods to collect and analyze online forum discussion posts from college students with autism spectrum disorder. Data was collected from the Wrong Planet "School and College Life" forum, which is a publicly viewable discussion forum. Source forum replies were coded into qualitative data analysis software NVivo in the first round of analysis as guided by (Astin's) I-E-O framework. Following this, a second round of coding occurred in which specific themes were established, from which this study draws data.

Results:

Support services do not work in isolation. Many students described multiple support systems (e.g. Housing, Counseling, and Advising) working in conjunction with one another during their successful transition to higher education. One student noted that "There are many support programs as well that can assist with the executive functioning issues, extra tutoring, and all the other things that come up like handling relationships, advocating, budgeting (a huge one), etc.". Students find their support systems through both formal and informal means. Many use services provided by their Office of Disability Services (ODS), but many students lack the awareness or documentation needed to obtain services. One student describes how he found his group of "interesting people" in a student association: "I prefer to meet people in a group that is interest-focused and where there is enough room to accommodate to slow processing speed and sensory processing differences."

Conclusions:

Institutions of higher education offer a variety of support services for students with ASD. Though services offered through ODS typically require documentation of a formal diagnosis, others are available without diagnosis or disclosure. Because some students do not have a formal diagnosis and many others choose not to disclose, colleges and universities must train faculty and staff throughout the institution to provide the support these students deserve.