



# INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ABSTRACTS

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## Students on the Spectrum

This month's article was written by Dr. Dana Burnside, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Wor-Wic Community College in Salisbury Maryland. Dr. Burnside shares her growing expertise and understanding of teaching students with special needs. Her keen observations and practical tips are valuable for faculty and administrators nationwide.

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The global pandemic has changed many aspects of our lives this year. Things we've taken for granted in the past are now different, and we're being forced to become comfortable with ways of doing things that are unfamiliar, and often initially uncomfortable. Last week, I had an issue with my Verizon bill and had to call customer service. I understood that because of COVID-19, customer service representatives were working from home, and wait times would be considerably longer. The wait was long. It was almost an hour long, whereas in the past connecting to a representative might have taken 10 minutes. I felt impatient; past the half hour mark, I even felt a bit agitated. But then she answered—a human being on the other end of the line, apologetic and ready to help. My issue was resolved quickly and professionally, and not for a moment could I behave in a way that was impatient, upset, or worse yet, unkind, to this person who was doing her best in a circumstance she couldn't control. It is critical that

we recognize and appropriately respond to circumstances that are beyond anyone's control. This encounter reminded me of the importance of teaching and practicing tolerance. Teaching tolerance is something I try to do in the college classroom, and exercising tolerance is something I've found to be a necessity when dealing with students with diverse needs.

As an Associate Professor of Communication Studies, I have no formal training in special education and no K-12 teaching experience. In the last 10 years, I've noticed more students with special needs appearing in my college classrooms. The population that has seemed to be increasing significantly, and relatively quickly, is students on "the spectrum." The Spectrum, as it is referred to now, is short for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). At one time students were labeled Autistic or having Asperger's Syndrome, but ASD, or the spectrum, more accurately describes the great variation among people who are autistic. The terms "low-functioning" and "high-functioning" are typically used to describe where a person falls on the spectrum. According to The National Institute of Mental Health, ASD is "a disorder that affects communication and behavior." The most common areas of difficulty for those on the spectrum include difficulty communicating and interacting with people, repetitive behaviors, the need for routine, and reluctance to

change a pattern or a behavior. Students on the spectrum tend to be very literal and often miss jokes and don't understand sarcasm. In my experience, they require very detailed information and clear explanations, and may need that information in writing, not just described orally. Because of the great variation of symptoms across the spectrum, not all people who are diagnosed with ASD have every symptom or experience it to the same degree, but those diagnosed have at least some of these symptoms.

In a 2018 article about how colleges can prepare for students with Autism, Borrell projected that based on statistics from The National Center for Special Education Research, "More than 200,000 students on the spectrum will arrive on campuses around the United States over the next decade." According to the article, the obstacles faced by students on the spectrum are rarely just about academic issues; rather they face social challenges, may experience anxiety and frustration, and may have difficulty communicating effectively with other students and their professors.

For many faculty members, the first encounter with a student on the spectrum will be unfamiliar or uncomfortable. Depending on the student's behaviors, it could even cause feelings of impatience or agitation. Good college teachers want to help every student be successful, but also recognize the need to maintain the appropriate college environment and serve all students. By focusing on a communicative approach with tolerance and compassion at its core, college teachers can serve students on the spectrum as well as the other students in their classrooms. Here are some tips.

**Seek Information:** The first step in managing any new situation is to make the unfamiliar more familiar. Do some research, visit the AutismSpeaks.org website, and develop an awareness of the spectrum and common challenges. Talk to the staff in Disability Services and use their resources. If a student has been identified and provided with some accommodations, follow up, and gain as much insight to that student's needs as possible.

Even after becoming more educated about ASD, the first classroom encounters with these students can still inspire feelings of discomfort or uncertainty as they may exhibit different behaviors than typical college students, including speaking out of turn, asking a lot of questions, and being impatient or socially inappropriate with the instructor or other students. This is when tolerance and compassion come into play.

**Develop Strategies:** Two of the most common challenges for teachers are students interrupting or asking too many questions, or asking repetitive questions, and managing group work.

#### *Too many questions or Repetitive Questions:*

This behavior often stems from the student's need for absolute clarity and finite detail. The thought that he or she may not immediately understand every detail of an explanation, or worse yet, an assignment, can cause panic and send the student into a hyper state, feeling stressed or confused. From a teacher's perspective, stopping a lecture frequently, or answering the same question several times can interrupt the flow of the plan for that class meeting and even use up time that was allotted for questions at the end or other necessary practice or preparation for the very

thing the student is focusing on.

When I recognize this characteristic in a student—the tendency to interrupt or question beyond the typical amount of in-class questions, I talk with him or her after class or in office hours and make several suggestions. I begin with a gentle explanation that there are certain things we must accomplish together, and therefore sometimes I need to move on. But, I am always available before class, after class, and during office hours. I suggest keeping a notepad handy and writing down every question that comes to mind during class. I can respond to them in a conversation outside of class, or address them via email. I also suggest that we have a code. I want students to ask questions in class, but I explain that if we've spent too long on one topic and need to move on, I'll say, "Thank you for your questions. I look forward to talking more later." This need to get answers, in detail, and quickly, and the inability to recognize when one is dominating class time is all part of this disorder, and is therefore a circumstance outside the student's control. Being direct, but gentle, and devising a strategy that saves the student's face and serves the other students in the classroom can help everyone feel more comfortable and facilitate effective instruction.

#### *Problems with Group Work:*

Students on the spectrum often struggle with social cues, politeness, and even listening to the suggestions of other students in a group. On occasion students assigned to work with a student on the spectrum will complain or come to me with issues. First, I try to get a clear understanding of the issue. If it's related to politeness, I can spend a few minutes in class remind-

ing everyone of some politeness guidelines for group work. However, if it is specific I try to give students the tools to be tolerant and show some understanding and compassion. For example, a group complained to me that a student who was on the spectrum was difficult to work with. He wanted to be in charge. Without breaching privacy, I was able to say, "Give him a job. Find a very specific task and put him in charge of it. If each of you has a very specific task I think you will find that you can all work together more successfully." I asked all of the students to work on developing understanding and patience. Group work is a challenge for most students, so clearly identifying areas of responsibility is beneficial for most students and almost always necessary for students on the spectrum who typically prefer a concrete directive with specific responsibilities and expectations. This approach worked well for the group.

### Get to Knowing the student:

The more effort you put into getting to know a student, the easier it will be to manage him or her in the classroom. Building trust is one of the most important factors in working with a student on the spectrum. Building trust means listening and responding with compassion. If he believes you care about him, you understand him, and you want to support him, he'll believe that you'll really address all of his concerns after class, and he'll likely respond to your cues in class, and be willing to use your office hours. One on one communication is very effective.

When you recognize behaviors that are beyond the student's control, and you work to make the unfamiliar familiar, and you exercise tolerance for differences and compassion for stu-

dents, you will see an amazing return for the effort.

She was standing frozen in the middle of my classroom. It was the first day of speech class, and the students were mingling for an ice breaker activity. At first I didn't appreciate that she was seemingly refusing to participate. As I milled about the class, I came to her. I asked if she needed something. She was shy and nervous, and she told me, "I don't talk to other students very well." I was concerned about this in a speech class, but I was hopeful that I could help. I told her I would help her introduce herself and led her to several small groups of students. That day was tough for her. She came to every class meeting, and she came early. She took copious notes and asked a lot of questions. She talked to me about being on the spectrum. I got to know her and we worked together, as she progressed significantly with every speech.

Two years later, she very eloquently shared her experiences as part of a student panel on students on the spectrum for our faculty.

*She described herself as a student this way: I always let the teachers know right away that I am someone with a disability, and I do need their help. I probably should have been more specific with my autism, but I would always get nervous talking about it. I should have shared more details on how my autism affects me such as: I have difficulty understanding body language, I do NOT understand sarcasm, I take things VERY literal, my brain is VERY busy processing everything going on around me, so I may ask you the same question many times or ask you to repeat an answer. However, the teachers also need to know that most students with disabilities work ten times harder than students without disabilities. We*

*show up for every class and take our classes very seriously because we are grateful for the opportunity.*

But the real highlight of that year came as I sat among my colleagues and watched her deliver the commencement speech.

*She shared with the crowd: If my parents had listened to doctors and therapists 20 years ago, I would not be standing here in front of you today giving this speech. At that time, it was suggested that I be placed in a special school because I was diagnosed with Autism. My future was not so bright. However, I did have parents who believed in me. I had teachers and therapists who saw my abilities and not my disabilities. I was always held to a high standard and was expected to meet those standards. The results? Today, I am a graduate.*

There wasn't a dry eye in the room as she thanked her teachers and the staff who supported and guided her. I have no doubt that in her life, people have been impatient with her, and unkind. I'm happy that she found tolerance and compassion on my campus. I will strive to make that the case for all students on the spectrum in my classrooms.

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