Meeting the Library Needs of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Kelly Boudreau
Public Services Operation Manager

Sherry Packard
Reference & Research Services Librarian

Connie Strittmatter
Strategic Projects Librarian
Session Overview

► Background & Process
► Initial Outputs
► Student Employee Training
► Assessing the Module
► Next Steps
Background

Statistics:
- estimated 2% of college students have ASD (White, Ollendick, & Bray, 2011)
- Fitchburg State: 34 students registered with Disability Services (8.7% of students registered with DS & 0.58% of total student population). **Number is underreported.**

How we got started:
- Project A+: Serving Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Academic Library
- Working group members
Our Goal

Provide high quality services and study spaces that support the learning of students on the spectrum
Process

► Met bi-weekly starting in January 2019

► Used the Project A+ manual to assess the library environment
Project A+
Serving Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Academic Library

- The Library Environment
- Communication
- Social Interaction
- Technology
- Employment
Process

► Created a list of characteristics and sensitivities

► Consulted with 2 BCBAs and University’s Director of Disabilities
Initial Outputs

➔ **Environmental Scan**
  - Ex. can we add dimmer switches to study rooms so lighting levels can be adjusted?

➔ **Signage Review**
  - Ex. Make signage for Library classroom more prominent

➔ **Communication Strategies**
  - Using closed versus open ended questions
Student Employee Training Not Meant To:

► Diagnose ASD in Patrons
► Highlight as different or “Other” Individuals on the Spectrum
Student Employee Training Goals:

► Provide Tools to Address Communication Breakdown

► Discuss Characteristics and Raise Awareness, Foster Empathy
Student Employee Training Challenges:

► Yearly In-Person Training: Attendance and Repetition
► New Student Employees
► COVID-19
Training Modules in Blackboard

► Presented to Library Staff (Aug 2020)

► Vetted by Director of Disability Services (Feb 2021)
Blackboard Training
Modules
Training Modules Timeline

► No Fall 2020 Training
► Student Employees Completed March/April 2021
► Training Assessment Completed April 2021
Student Training Assessment

► IRB Exemption

► Goal

Gain student employee perspectives on modules and input about the Library and University Environment
Student participation

100% of student employees volunteered to be interviewed

Layout, Timing and Navigation
Content of Training

★ What did they think was the purpose of the training
★ What they liked
★ What they didn't like
★ Did they find it engaging

“I think it was to give all library workers a better insight on how to handle a situation and if someone on the spectrum comes into the library - overall how to make them more comfortable and have a better experience in the library”
Campus and Library Environment

- Library 1st Floor Computer/Printer Areas
- Campus Dining Areas, Game Room
- Campus Events, Rock the Block, Sports Events

Suggestions for Improvement?

- Keep Computers Spaced Out, Move one Printer
- Provide Noise Cancelling Headphones
- Online Streaming of Events
- Spacing and Pathing for Outdoor Events
- Buddy System
Applying Strategies at the Library or Elsewhere

“Sometimes people have rough days. So being patient, having a kind tone, not aggressive. You don’t always know if someone has a disability or not.”

“A patron asked a question, but wouldn’t look at me. I didn’t know what to do at the time, so I would try to make eye contact and I thought they were being rude, but after this [training] I can see that they weren’t being rude. I would have used different strategies.”
“Yes, I think when they first get hired. Not a lot of jobs in the world teach you to talk to someone who might look different or have a disability, you’re not taught that.”

Who Else?

- All Students
- Anyone in Customer Service
- Tour Guides
- Faculty

“Every student on campus should take this training. Our generation knows nothing about autism.”
Next Steps...

Proposed Changes to the Training Modules

★ Module/Exercise for “when to apply strategies”
★ Discussion Board Change: Post before reading comments
★ Module on Person First Language
★ Additional Training for other Disabilities
Next Steps...

Student Suggestions

- Staff and student employees wear a nametag
- Offer more information about the entire range of the Autism Spectrum
- Offer this training to newly hired student employees
- Use patience!

“Staff and students should wear a nametag, it’s very important to someone on the spectrum. It identifies people they can reach out to and offers a friendly atmosphere.”
Next Steps

► Implement recommendations from environmental scan and signage review
► Explore expanding the training to other departments on campus
► Openly license our content for others to use
Questions

Kelly Boudreau: kboudre2@fitchburgstate.edu

Sherry Packard: spackard@fitchburgstate.edu

Connie Strittmatter: cstrittm@fitchburgstate.edu

Link to presentation: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HxaP5gv-itXuOy8oh4s9lQ0gkCSGL0NL/view?usp=sharing

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