

College Students and The Autism Spectrum



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**IF YOU'VE MET
ONE PERSON WITH
AUTISM, YOU'VE
MET ONE PERSON
WITH AUTISM.
DR. STEPHEN SHORE**

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Developmental disability that affects neurodevelopmental systems
- Present at birth - *not outgrown*
- Includes what was formerly known as:
 - *Asperger's Syndrome*
 - *PDD-NOS*
 - *Classic Autism*
 - Range of Symptoms and characteristics



ASD Criteria and Characteristics

Level 1 Autism

What you may see

Is it ASD?

Persistent deficits:

- With social communication
- Interaction across different contexts

Difficulty with:

- Social emotional reciprocity
- Nonverbal Behaviors used in social interactions
- Developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships

Social Emotional Reciprocity

Social and Emotional characteristics of ASD

- Difficulty with give and take - flow of conversation
- May abruptly change subject of conversation
- Not interested in other's choices
- Little interest in sharing personal details
- Lack of awareness of the needs and feelings of others.
- Little to no sharing of affect: *If I smile at you, you may not smile back*

Unusual or unexpected social approach

- May “walk right in” to your office without knocking
- May walk away in the middle of a conversation

Social Emotional Reciprocity, 2

Difficulty judging personal space

- May stand too close
- May walk between two people talking / in the middle of a group

Lack of initiation or response to social interactions

- Limited awareness of emotions of others and how to respond
- Students may tell you they do not understand “small talk”
- May not ask for help or respond when help is offered
- May not recognize that something can hurt other people
- May not want to interact with others and prefer solitary activities.

Nonverbal Behaviors

Nonverbal Behaviors Used for Social Interaction:

Verbal and non verbal communications don't "match"

- Words may not match affect
- Difficulties with eye contact and body language
 - Can be a lack of eye contact
 - ...*Or intense and unmodulated eye contact*
- Challenges in understanding and use of gestures
- Limited facial expressions and nonverbal communication

Developing, Maintaining and Understanding Relationships

- Lack of imaginary play and little sharing as children
- Difficulty making and keeping friends
- Language skills can be hyper developed - may not speak like peers
- More comfortable with *younger children / adults*
 - *They do not place the same level of social demands as do college - age peers.*
- Limited understanding of complex social behavior / social cues especially in college
- Difficulty adjusting behavior to different social situations

Restricted and Repetitive Behavior

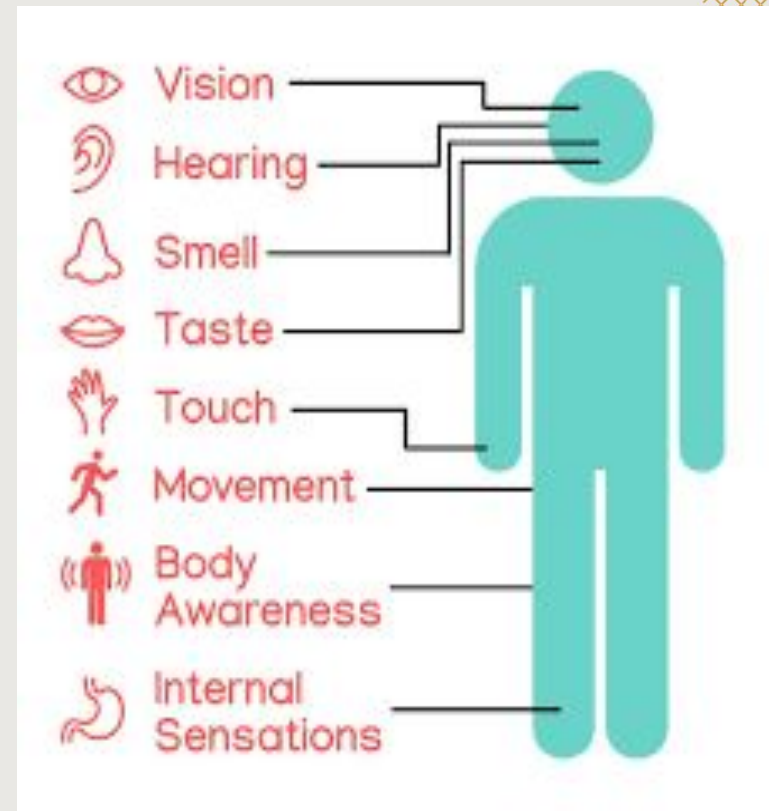
Rigidity - insistence on sameness

- Rule bound
- Extreme distress at any change in routine
- Rigid thinking
- May eat the same food every day
- Inability to shift attention or “go with the flow”
- Things must be done the same way every time
- Lack of flexibility makes the transition to college more difficult

Sensory issues

May be extra sensitive or not responsive to:

- ❑ *Light*
- ❑ *Sound*
- ❑ *Smell*
- ❑ *Taste*
- ❑ *Texture*
- ❑ *Internal / external sensations*



What is Stimming?

ASD Examples

- ❖ Rocking
- ❖ Pacing
- ❖ Jumping
- ❖ Humming
- ❖ Talking to self
- ❖ Hand movements

Neurotypical Examples

- ❖ Nail Biting
- ❖ Hair Twirling
- ❖ Tapping fingers

Why Stim?

Why do we Stim?

- ❖ Response to under stimulation *or...*
- ❖ Over stimulation
- ❖ Response to positive or negative emotion
- ❖ Comfort oneself
- ❖ Self-regulation

Interest vs. Special Interest?

- Perseverative
- Peer culture ignored unless it matches interest
- Extensive knowledge
- Conversation directed to special interest
- Need to talk about the interest
- Special interest can be a springboard for major

Interesting Interests

- ★ Anime
- ★ Computer systems
- ★ Movies
- ★ History
- ★ Trains
- ★ Apple vs. Android
- ★ Music
- ★ Gaming
- ★ Politics

Differences between high school and college

Academic

Social

Daily Life

From High School to College: Differences in LEGAL PROTECTIONS

High School:	College:
<p>The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the law that provides for special education</p>	<p>The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act are about equal access.</p>
<p>IDEA is about success.</p>	<p>ADA is about access.</p>
<p>Education is a RIGHT and must be provided to all.</p>	<p>Education is NOT a right. Students must apply to attend and be “otherwise qualified” to attend.</p>
<p>Core modifications of classes and materials may be required.</p>	<p>Fundamental modifications are not required - only accommodations.</p>
<p>School district develops an Individual Education Program (IEP) and must follow this legal document in the provision of educational services.</p>	<p>Student must identify needs and ask for services. NO IEPs in the college setting.</p>

From High School to College: Differences in **ADVOCACY** and **ACCESS**

High School:	College:
Student is helped by parents and teachers, even without asking directly.	Student must request accommodations from a disability services office.
School is responsible for arranging for all accommodations and modifications	Student must self-advocate and arrange for accommodations.
Parent has access to student records.	Parent has no access to student records without student's written consent.
Parent advocates for student.	Student advocates for self.
Teachers meet regularly with parents to discuss the student's educational progress.	College faculty members seldom, if ever, interact with parents and expect the students to address issues with them directly.
Student needs parent's permission to participate in most activities.	Student is adult and gives own permission.

From High School to College: Differences in STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY

High School:	College:
School attendance is mandatory.	Students should attend lectures to maintain grades, but class attendance is not always mandatory.
Schools are required to identify students with disabilities through free assessment and the IEP process.	Students are responsible for coordinating with staff and faculty in order to receive accommodations. Students are not required to name their disability when discussing accommodations with professors.
School officials monitor students' progress towards their IEP goals, and communicate openly with parents and the student.	No formal IEPs, students are responsible for monitoring their own progress and communicating with professors, academic advisors, and guardians.
Teachers meet regularly with parents to discuss the student's educational progress.	College faculty members seldom, <i>if ever</i>, interact with parents and expect students to address issues with them directly.

Challenges of College



Support and Structure

Less support and structure.

Each day may have different routine

College spaces can feel
overwhelming

Semester syllabus must be
managed on own

Challenges of College



**Student chooses
own classes**

**Suddenly, student
is expected to do
things
independently**

**Self-advocating,
maybe for the first
time**

**May be living on
own for the first
time**

Social Challenges

**New on
campus**

How can I...

*Make new
friends?*

Join clubs?

*Balance social
and academic
life?*

Daily Life

How do I...

*Deal with a
roommate?*

*Manage a sleep
/ wake
schedule?*

*Make sure I
have clean
clothes?*

What about therapy? and risk in the ASD population?

Why Therapy?
Is Therapy different?
Assessing Risk

Why Therapy?

- Some can use academic strengths to hide social deficits, but...
- Increase in social demands with college and young adulthood
- Family members often suggest therapy for assistance with:
 - Mood issues, anxiety and depression
 - Inability to find a job despite educational level / degree
 - Problems from saying or doing the wrong thing
 - Getting fired

Is Therapy Different?

**Neurotypical
Student**

***Partnership
between client
and therapist***

***Emotional
encouragement***

***Clients come up
with
their own answers***

**ASD
Student**

***More active
engagement from
therapist***

Suggestions

Directions

***Information
gathering***

When Assessing Risk...

Pay special attention to these core ASD features:

- Higher intellectual than emotional maturity
- Limited ability to describe feelings
- Lack of affect *and / or*
- Disconnect between words and affect
- Are you doing a CSSR-S?
 - *Some* ASD students cannot tolerate long and confusing questions and answer randomly.

Depression and Suicide

- ❑ Lifetime risk of depression in ASD reported to be 37% (*Hollocks, et al., 2019*)
- ❑ Lifetime risk of anxiety reported to be 42% (*Hollocks, et al., 2019*)
- ❑ A reported 7 - 47% of ASD study subjects had history of suicide attempts. (*Zahid & Upthegrove, 2017*)
- ❑ High positive correlation between depression and suicidality in general population.
- ❑ Study of 374 adults (*Cassidy, et al., 2014*) only 31% of suicidal ASD subjects were depressed.

Risk Factors for Suicide

Risk factors: (Cassidy et al., 2014, 2018; McDonnell et al., 2020)

- Lack of social support
- Loneliness
- Under / Unemployment
- Bullying / Victimization, Financial abuse
- Physical and Sexual abuse

More risk factors: (Segers & Rawana, 2014)

- Personality Disorder
- Being male, African-American or Hispanic
- Lower socioeconomic status

*Have you wondered what else
might be different in your
sessions...or conversations?*

What might come up...or not

Issues you may Encounter

Challenges within your session:

- Attention
- Engagement
- Processing
- Getting to the point
- Self-monitoring
- *Match your pace to your student / client*

In Session

- Be direct
- Avoid using expressions or idioms.
- *Say one thing at a time.*
- If giving instructions, be specific
- Check in to make sure the student is following along
- A triage or intake ***may take longer than expected***

In Session, continued

- Follow up verbal directions or guidelines in writing.
- Provide reminders of sessions / meetings.
- Rephrase questions if needed
- Check in to see how student is doing
- *Will student reach out if help is needed?*

What if...

You meet a student in your office for the first time and they say:

- *“I think I’m autistic, I saw something on social media”*

Explore:

- Does the student want therapy?
- Understanding?
- Community?
- Accommodations?

What is Neurodiversity? and is language important?

The Neurodiversity Movement
Identity first vs People First

Neurodiversity

- Autism is part of neurodiversity
- “No two brains are exactly the same”
- We all have strengths and challenges
- Accept / include neurodiverse people as you would neurotypical
- Research money *should not be used to cure*, but to improve existing systems
- All should get accommodations they need
- Different should *not* lead to exclusion



Language

“Autistic person”:

- ★ *Example of Identity first language*
- ★ *More empowering*
- ★ *Autism is an essential part of the person’s identity*

“Person with autism”:

- ★ *Example of Person first language*
- ★ *“Disease model” (“person with cancer”)*

Language has power to change attitudes

Here is what we've heard...

- ❑ *"I am an autistic person"*
- ❑ *"I'm an Aspie"*
- ❑ *"I don't refer to myself as having autism"*
- ❑ *"I am ok with whatever words / labels people use"*
- ❑ *"I'm just me"*

Not sure what language to use? *Ask!*

Autism and LGBTQ+

- Emerging area of research
- Increasing studies finding association between ASD and gender dysphoria
- Parents minimized / rejected dysphoria or identity and questioned whether ASD caused or confused gender issues.
- Many ASD report having had neither vocabulary nor education to understand own identities before college.
- Sex education inadequate for many disabled persons.
- ASD individuals with dual identities of disability and LGBTQ+ reported experiencing bias and lack of fit *in both communities*.

Autism and Intersectionality

Intersectionality generally known to acknowledge relationship between:

- Gender
- Race
- Ethnicity
- Class

(Cho, Crenshaw, et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 2015)

Less consideration given to intersectionality as it relates to:

- Disability Status
- ASD
- Gender identity.

Multiple identities lead to more social challenges and isolation

Spectrum Strengths

- Within the entire ASD population, ~40% have average or higher IQ*;
- Many are capable of handling college level academics.
- Some have exceptional visual, academic, and musical abilities.
- Creativity – distinctive imagination, expression of ideas
- Unique Thought Process lead to innovative solutions
- Can hyper-focus on one area of study, leading to subject mastery

<https://autism.org/average-or-high-iq-in-individuals-with-asd-may-be-higher-than-previously-estimated/>

ENHANCE Program



ENHANCE

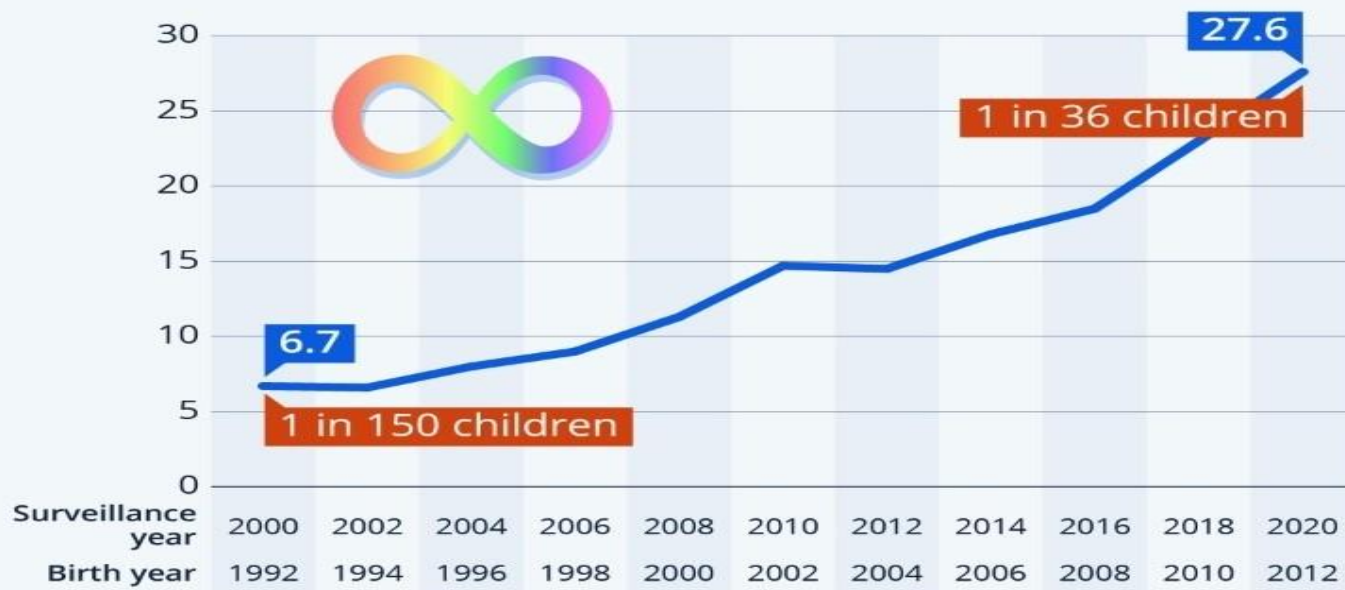
THE ENHANCE PROGRAM AT RAMAPO COLLEGE

www.ramapo.edu/enhance

Increase in Numbers - US

The Rising Prevalence of Autism

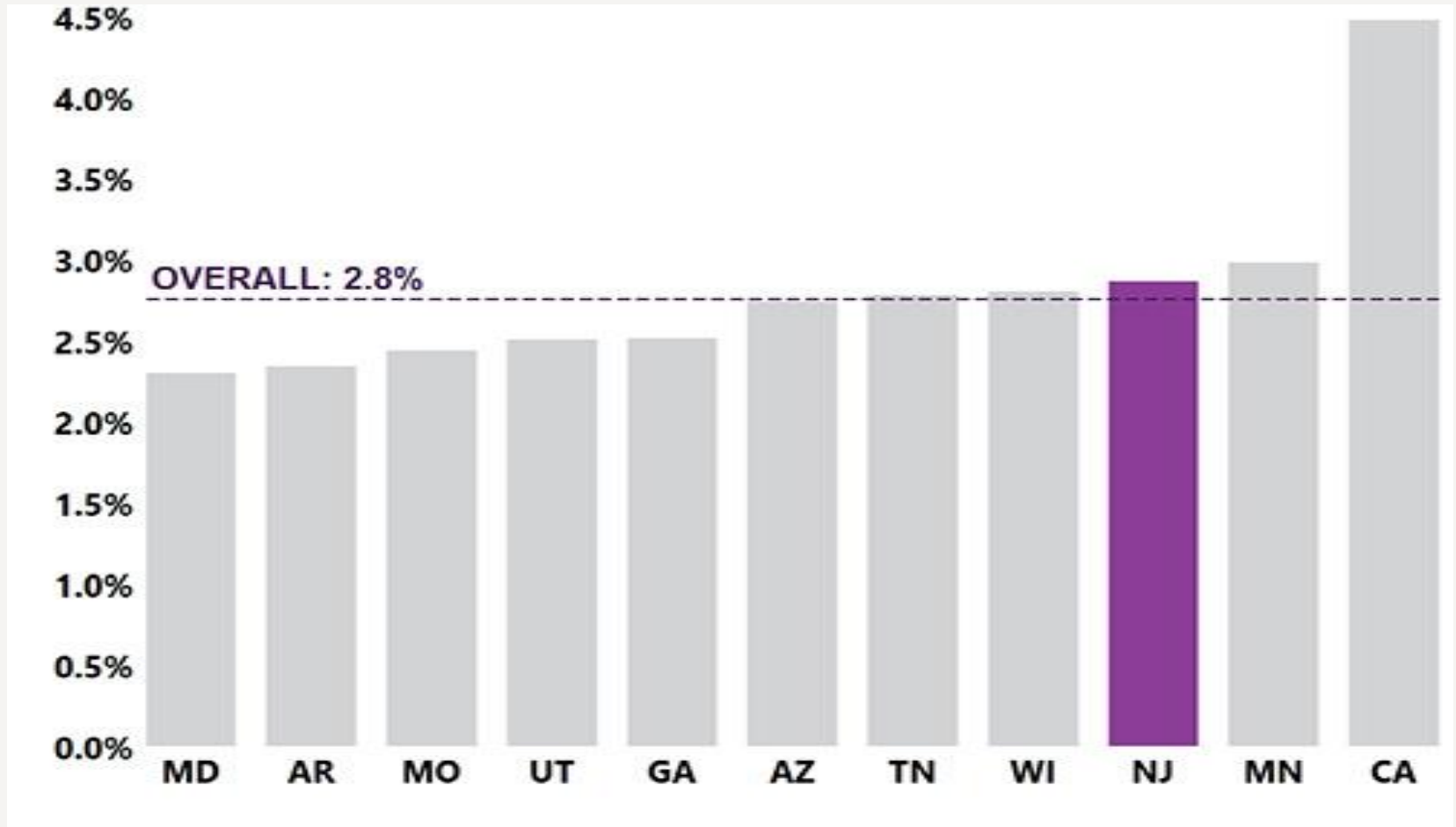
Identified prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) per 1,000 children in the U.S.



Source: Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network via CDC



New Jersey: 1 in 34



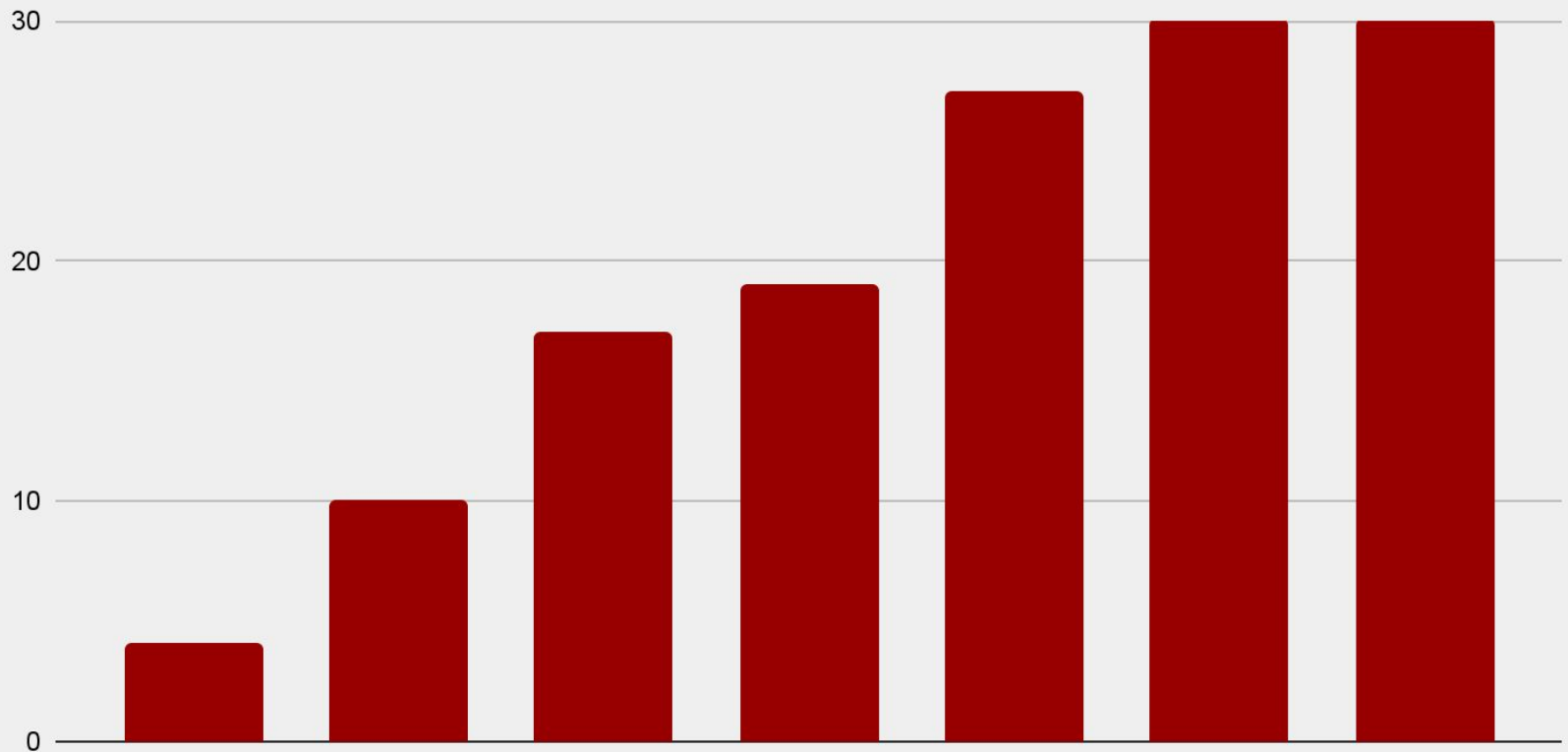
ENHANCE Program

- Students commit for full year.
- Accepted to Ramapo College before application is considered.
 - ENHANCE Assistant Director, ENHANCE Counselor
 - Counseling Center staff also sees ENHANCE Students
- Support growing number of ASD students to engage with RCNJ
- Therapeutic, emotional and social support
 - Weekly Individual Counseling
 - 2 Peer Mentor Meetings per week
 - 3 Group meetings per week
 - Orientation before classes start

ENHANCE Program Growth

ENHANCE began in January 2018 with 4 students and has an enrollment of 30 students for 2023 -2024 academic year. This represents an **increase of 550%**

ENHANCE Program - Student Growth 2018 - 2024



Weekly ENHANCE Therapy

- Students complete CCAPS
- Address feelings and manage stress
- How are you acclimating to campus life:
 - Have you made friends?
 - Have you joined clubs?
- Are you attending class regularly?
 - Are you keeping up with class demands?
- Are you meeting with your disabilities counselor?
- Do you need tutoring / additional resources?
- ***Not sure who to go to on campus? Check in with ENHANCE***

Peer Mentors

- Weekly individual meetings with ENHANCE students
- Meet for breakfast or lunch
- “Walk and talk” around campus
- Campus game room
- Study Buddy - meet in Library
- Help students find clubs to join
- Acclimate to campus
- Participate and co-facilitate group meetings
- *Fulfill MSW, BSW, and Psychology Fieldwork in ENHANCE*

Social Event

- ★ Peer Mentors rotate leadership of this weekly meeting
- ★ Additional nighttime Social Events during the semester
- ★ Interactive, promote friendship within group
 - Wordle, Connections, Spelling Bee
 - Jeopardy, Kahoot
 - Board Games
 - Hangman
 - “I Spy”
 - Nintendo Switch

Academic Workshop

- Reading and color coding your syllabus
- Using a planner / Google Calendar
- Time management strategies
- Organization
- Prioritizing assignments
- Understanding your Learning style
- Executive Functioning
- One on one assistance putting weekly assignments into planners

Connections Group

- Weekly group meetings for peer support
- Examples of topics:
 - Navigating friendships
 - Roommate challenges
 - Adjusting to living on campus
 - Communication skills
 - How to thrive at RCNJ
 - How do you feel about your diagnosis? Do you disclose?

What Challenges do we see?

Weakness in organizational skills / lack of “college readiness”

Students resist attending ENHANCE meetings

Group work produces significant stress

Student behavior in group chat, class, on campus

Students asking many questions in class

Daily Living Issues

ENHANCE Student Accomplishments

- ❑ Scholarship recipients
- ❑ Jazz and Concert Band musicians
- ❑ Ramapo Chorale and soloists
- ❑ Leaders in Service
- ❑ Actors in Campus Theater Productions
- ❑ Announcers for Campus Events
- ❑ E-Board presidents and Board members
- ❑ Honor Society members
- ❑ Honors Sorority and Fraternity members
- ❑ Writers for Ramapo newspaper

Thank you!

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<https://www.ramapo.edu/enhance/>

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External links:

College Autism Network: <https://collegeautismnetwork.org/>

Autism Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN): <https://autisticadvocacy.org/>

Wrong Planet (ASD Community): <https://wrongplanet.net/>