

Teaching and Supporting Students with Autism



Disability and Access Services
Division of Student Affairs

Autism Awareness Month
Love. Hope. Accept.



Who am I?

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Grew up in Palatine, Barrington, Lake Zurich
Dad once taught courses at NLU



Today's Agenda

1. Autism 101

- a. Choosing our Language
- b. Challenging Common Assumptions
- c. Defining Core Characteristics

2. Autism in College

- a. Teaching: Classroom and Assignments
- b. Living: Residence Halls, Student Orgs, Advising

3. Supporting Autistic Students

- a. Accommodations: Not Just Disability Access Services office
- b. Universal Design: Inside & Outside the Classroom
- c. Everyday Actions: Clarity & Consistency



A Note on Language

Person-First (Student with Autism) or Identity-First (Autistic Student)

We do both.

There is considerable disagreement about the appropriate use of language associated with autism; members of some organizations prefer “identity-first” language while others advocate “person-first” language.

The students we interviewed for one of our recent studies used a wide variety of terms when describing themselves and others with autism.

Another Note on Language

Asperger's & High Functioning

Asperger's Syndrome

- No longer "official" diagnosis, though **some use as label** ("Aspie")
- Originally described autistic individuals with **average or higher intellect**

High Functioning Autism

- **No longer appropriate**; concerns over assumptions and measurement
- "Just because a person has typical or expected intellectual abilities, does not necessarily mean they have good functional skills for their age."
 - The opposite is just as true.

From: Gail Alvares (2019) Why we should stop using the term "high functioning autism"



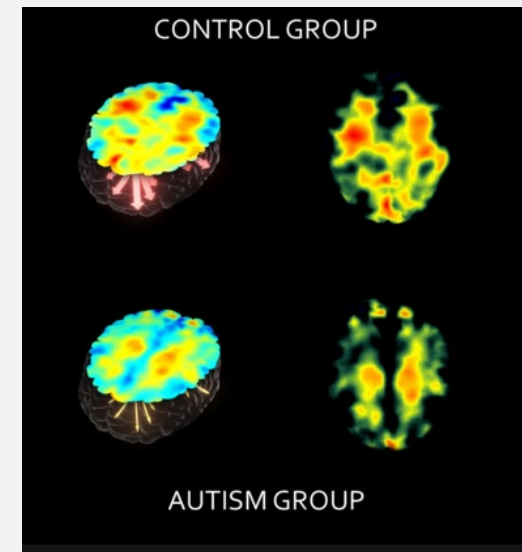
Defining Autism's Characteristics

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a **neurological variation** that is characterized by qualitative differences in the development of **cognitive, language, social, and/or motor skills**.
- Autism is a **spectrum**, so the characteristics of ASD appear differently in each person.
- These differences are often observed through challenges in **social communication, forming relationships** with other people, and grasping **abstract concepts**.

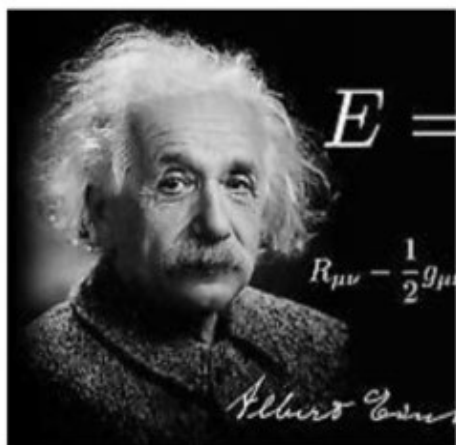


What is Autism?

- A **hard-wired, brain-based** difference; it is not a “choice” nor anyone’s “fault”
- Not a disease or disorder to be “cured” but **differences to be understood and supported**
- **Great potential** for learning and growth
- No two students are the same



Challenging Assumptions

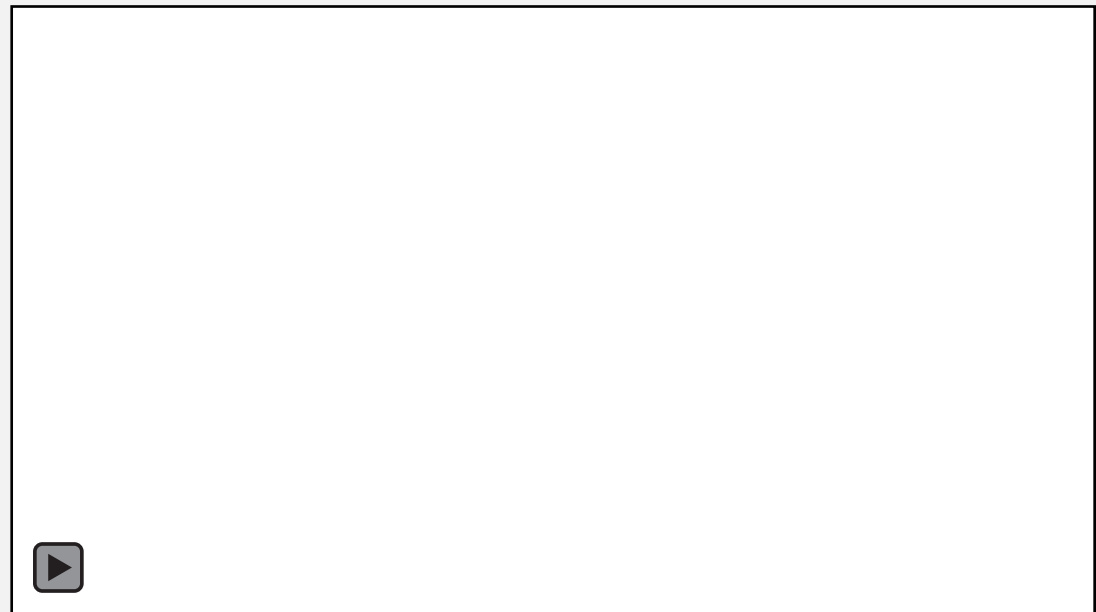


Challenging Assumptions



Examples of Traits: Dan

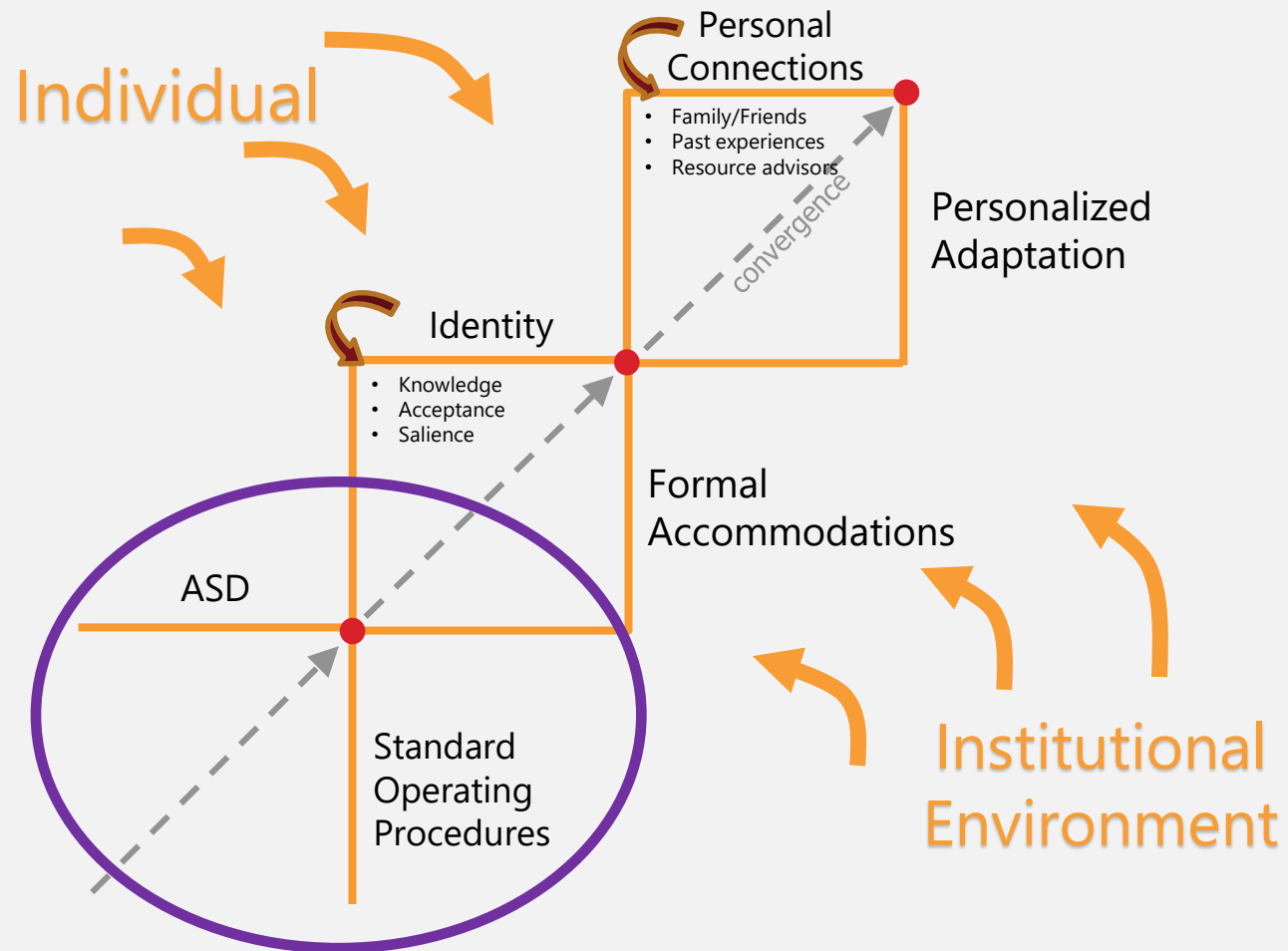
1. **Finger-flicking**
2. **Change in routine** is hard
3. Very particular about food
4. Smells can cause anxiety, nervousness
5. Noises, too
6. **Hyperfocus** on a subject
7. Likes to wear the same thing
8. Doesn't always get **sarcasm**
9. Doesn't tolerate **crowds** well
10. Talks really fast



http://bit.ly/MY_FIRST_YT_VIDEO

Individuals w/
Autism
&
College
Environments

Which *Standard
Operating
Procedures* might
create tension for
students w/autism?



How Autism Affects College

- Procedural Consistency; **Changing Plans or Routines**
- **Sensory Sensitivity** (sounds, light, smells, touch, taste)
- Reading of **Body Language** and **Facial Expressions**
- **Literal / Linear Thinking**; Missing Sarcasm
- **Singular Interest** / Hyper Focus



What does this look like INSIDE the classroom?

Communication can seem different:

- Talks too much, **goes on and on** about a topic
- Struggles with **abstract concepts** and **different perspectives**

Can be challenged by assignments:

- Seeks very **specific instructions**, challenged by vague or flexible tasks
- Work may not be turned in on time; OR **always on time**
- **Generalizing skills and concepts** is difficult

The social part of class may be stressful:

- Working in **small groups**
- **Presenting** or answering questions **in front of class**
- **Critiquing** others' work, or **being critiqued**



What does this look like OUTSIDE of class?

Independent living

- **Sensory sensitivities** make certain environments uncomfortable
- Social cues and **unspoken rules** of social life
- **Roommate challenges**; floor and hall interactions can be difficult

Extracurricular activities

- **Seeks social interactions** through organizations and activities...
- *but* **communication and social differences cause conflicts**

Individual Interactions

- **Eye contact; functional purpose**; more response less initiating
- Seemingly **rigid thinking, repeating questions**



When tensions happen...

Faculty / Peer Perspective:

- "S/he/they just **doesn't 'get it.'**"
- "S/he/they can't get out of their own way."
- "S/he/they **can't see the big picture.**"
- "How did s/he/they **not know that would happen?**"

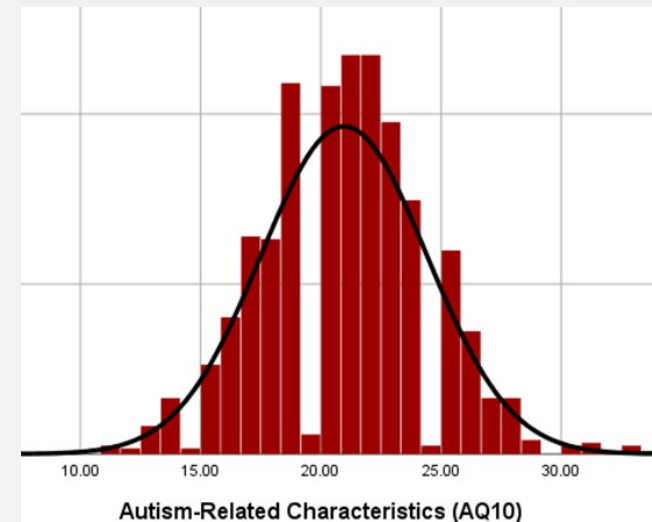
Student Conduct:

- **Stalking** / harassment
- **Disruptions** of meetings, classes
- **"Unreasonable"** demands



Autism Under Cover

- At least 1/3 of autistic college students **do not disclose**
- Some students don't get **diagnosed until after college**
- Many students have **sub-clinical traits / behaviors**
 - Nearly *all* students
 - show *some* autism-related characteristics
 - *some* of the time



This material is based, in part, upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant Number 1612090. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

Supporting Autistic Students



With the appropriate support, people with ASD **can be successful** in educational settings, participate in activities they enjoy, and experience fulfilling careers.

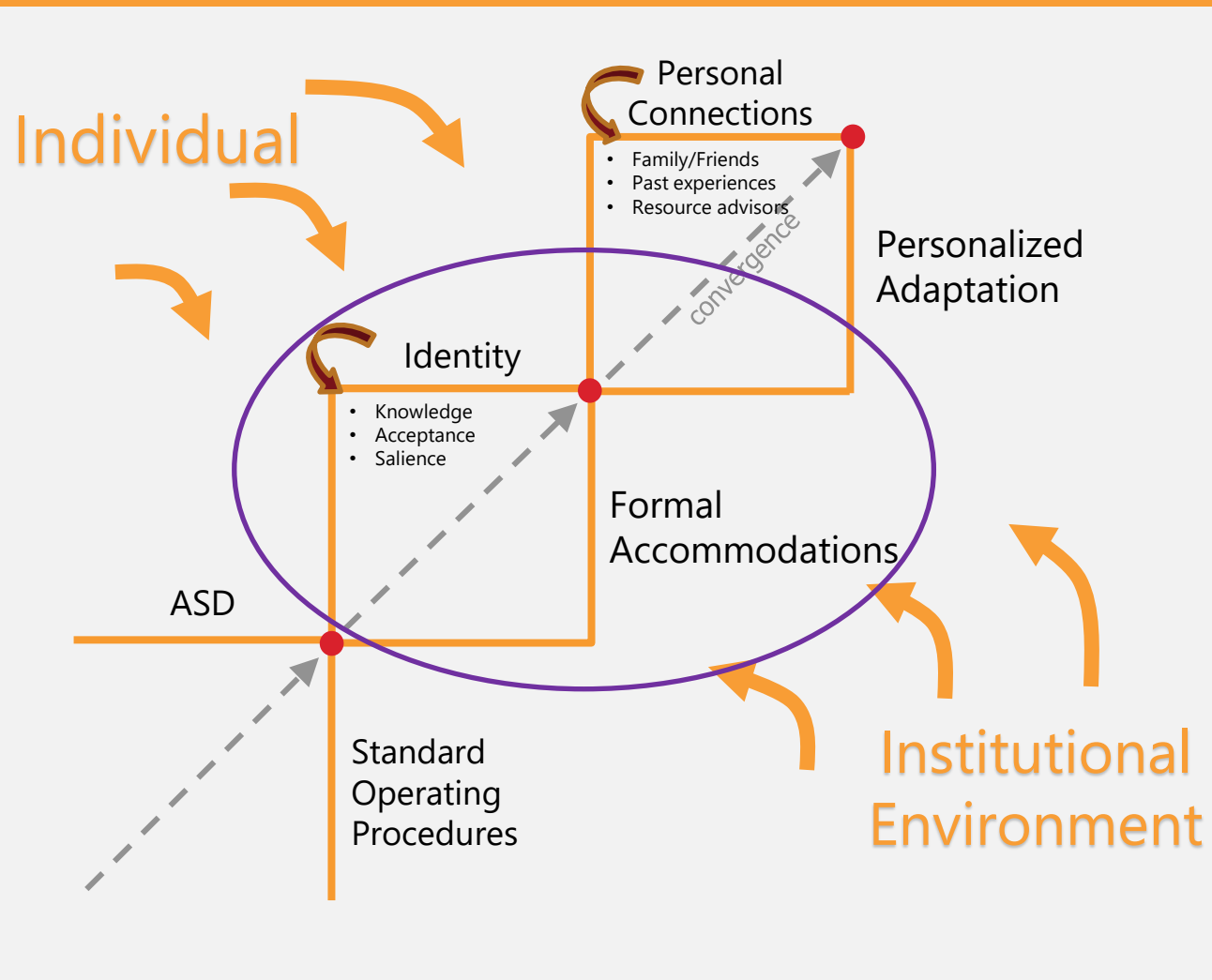
ASD $\neq$ GPA

ASD + STEM $\neq$ GPA

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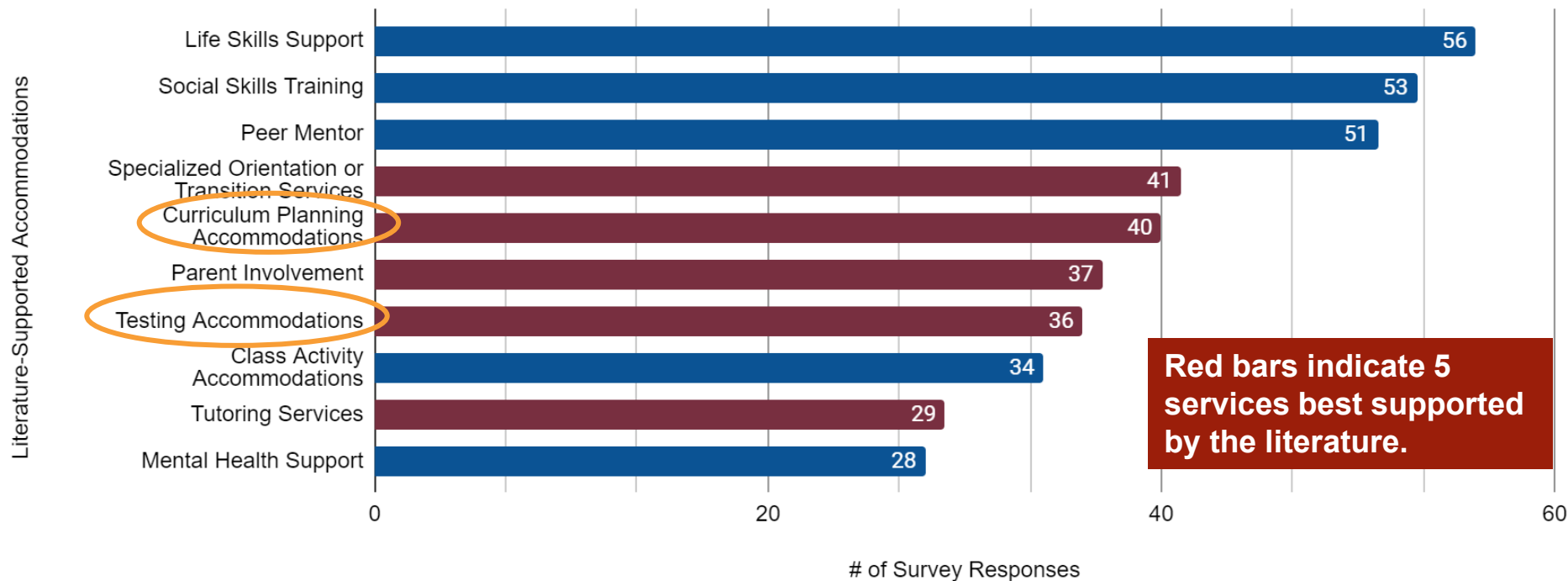
Individuals w/ Autism & College Environments

Which *Standard
Operating
Procedures* might
be problematic for
students w/autism?



Accommodations Can Help

Number of ASP's that Provide Each Literature-Supported Accommodation



But... Sometimes Not Enacted



College Autism Network
ADVOCACY | RESEARCH | TRAINING

Fast Fact #8

Formal accommodations may not adequately support students' academic needs. One reason for this deficiency is that **student accommodations are not always fulfilled by teachers**, which can be very challenging for students.

Here are some examples of what students may perceive when faculty don't consistently and appropriately implement accommodations.



Source:
Sarrett, 2018



And Likely Are Not Enough

Accommodations and Support in Higher Education: Insights from the Autism Community

Most Frequently Received Accommodations (Academic)

1. Extended test time
2. Note takers
3. Distraction free test areas
4. Flexible or extended due dates for assignments
5. Use of technology in the classroom



Supports Most Commonly Desired (Social & Sensory)

1. Increased autism awareness on campus
2. Sensory friendly spaces and practices
3. Educational practices designed for multiple learning preferences
4. A disability support group
5. More acceptance of self-stimulatory behavior ("stimming")



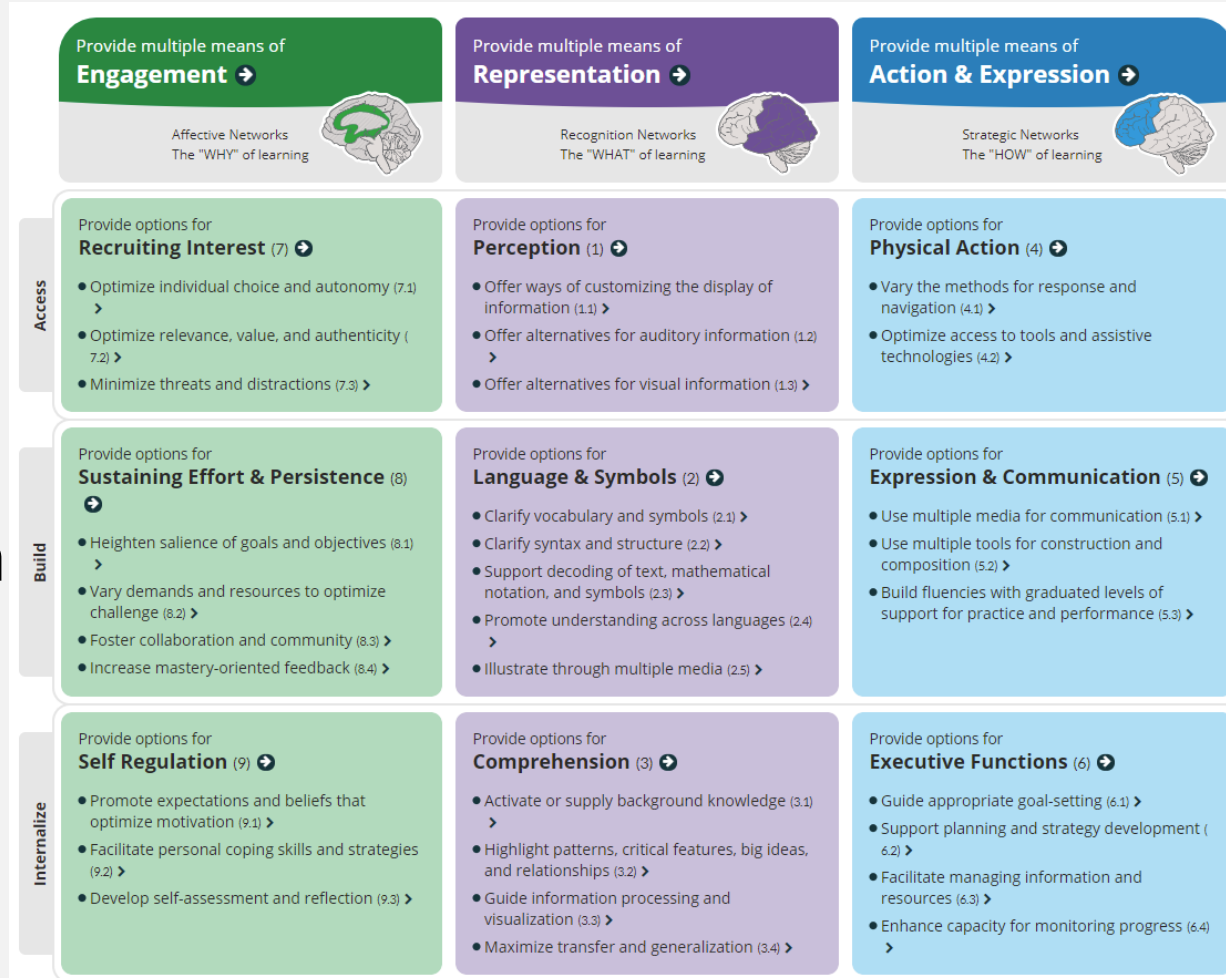
Source: Sarrett, 2018



Universal Design

Multiple Means of...

1. Engagement
2. Representation
3. Action & Expression

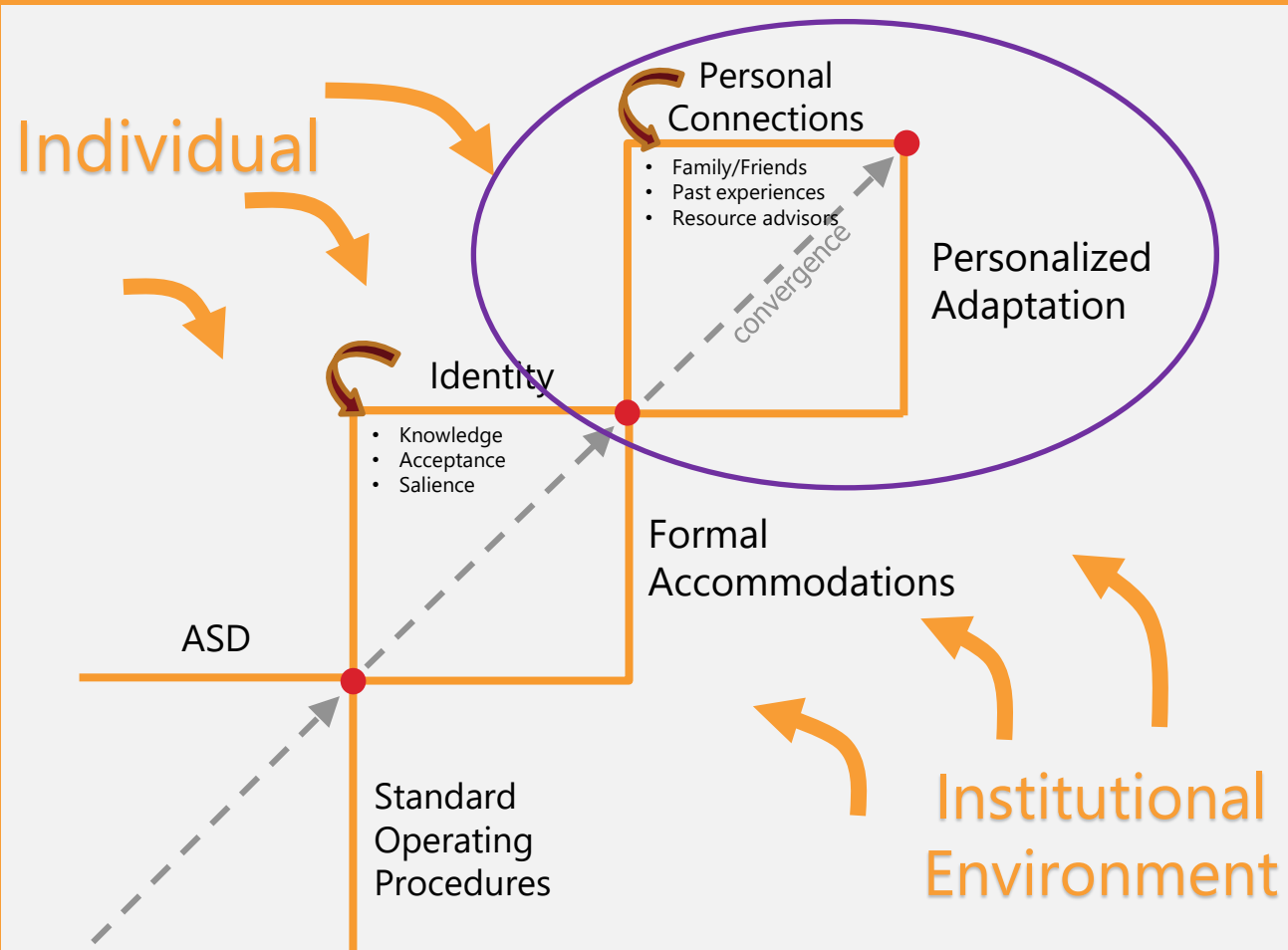


Source: CAST (2018). Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2.
<http://udlguidelines.cast.org>



Individuals w/
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Which *Standard
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Supporting Students - Everywhere

1. Clarity

1. Requirements
2. Rules
3. Responsibilities

2. Consistency

1. People
2. Places / Environments
3. Processes



Directions, Feedback, Meetings

- Be **Direct** and **Explicit**
 - Watch for your own “niceness bias.”
- Split / chunk projects into **smaller pieces**.
 - Directions & Meetings too
- Ask the student to ***demonstrate understanding***.
 - Write things down, even what seems obvious to you.
- Promote **student agency**, yield control
 - Let students pick time, place, and settings for meetings
 - Let students pick assignment topics or assessment processes



Creating Change on Your Campus

What level of response are you seeking to achieve at this time?

Raising Awareness and Acceptance



Professional development specific to students with autism



Extend existing services to meet a more specialized need



Develop targeted services for students with autism



Comprehensive model for students with autism

([Rochester Institute of Technology, 2014](#))



College Autism Network



COLLEGE AUTISM NETWORK
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Advocacy



Research



Training

UNIVERSITY LIFE WITH ASD: FACULTY KNOWLEDGE AND STUDENT NEEDS
College Autism Network Fast Fact #12
JUNE 2020

Students with ASD are frustrated trying to access support

"It's difficult to explain these issues to other people when they don't see an actual problem, because when you're diagnosed with mild (ASD), people don't understand that you actually need help with some things."
—4th year university student with ASD

STUDENTS WITH ASD

SUPPORT SERVICES

Autism-Specific College Support Programs: National Report
September 16, 2018

This national report describes the services and structures of a nationally-representative sample of 60 Autism-Specific Programs (ASPs) across the US.

Control	Annual Fees	Level
42 Public	20 Programs have no fees	53 4-Year
18 Private	21 Programs can cost \$1,000+	7 2-Year

ASPs selected which services they provide out of 10 accommodations supported by the literature.

Regional Breakdown

- Far West: 6
- Southwest: 6
- Southeast: 13
- Plains: 3
- Great Lakes: 12
- Mid East: 18
- Rocky Mountains: 2

ASP Survey Respondents Represented 25 Different States

This chart shows the most commonly listed eligibility requirements provided by ASPs.

The following pages provide further breakdowns of ASP survey responses by region, setting, and type.

Key Takeaways

- Accommodations offered at universities are not tailored to the needs of students with ASD.
- Professors had a limited understanding of the needs of students with ASD.
- Professors found the information available on supporting students with ASD to be overwhelming.

Action Items

Colleges and universities need to:

- Identify more suitable accommodations for students with ASD
- Provide disability and autism-specific trainings for faculty and staff

Other Resources

- College Autism Network's Virtual Association of Scholars (CANVAS)
- CAN Fast Fact #8: Why Accommodations Don't Always Work

Source
Zinsvile, S.M., Edgerton, V., & Bracken, J. (2019). University life with ASD: Faculty knowledge and student needs. Autism, 23, 726-736. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1063426918781448>

www.naspa.org www.CollegeAutismNetwork.org

AUTISM CAREER EMPOWERMENT

