Examining a Pilot Mentorship Program Geared for University Students who have an Autism Spectrum Disorder
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BACKGROUND

• In recent years, many post-secondary institutions have reported increased numbers of students who have an Autism Spectrum Disorder (Eaves, Ho, 2008; Smith, 2007; VanBergeijk, Klin, & Volkmar, 2008). Eaves and Ho (2008) reported that approximately 30% of their sample of adults with an ASD attended a post-secondary institution. Further, a survey of 80 American post-secondary institutions indicated that an average of 10 students identify themselves as having an ASD to obtain extra support. While these students are participating in academic activities, several studies have found that the participation of these students in other aspects of college or university life is below the level of individuals who are not reporting any disabilities ( Skinner, 2003; Thomas, 2000).

• A review of the recent literature revealed primarily American studies on adults with ASDs and their post-secondary experience with little information about developing support for Canadian students. Recent information provided by the Counseling and Disability Services Department at York University reports staggering increases in the number of students self-identifying with an ASD.

• While students were able to obtain academic support, the CDS reported that there was significant need for social support at the university level. Research has shown that this is a common area of difficulty. In particular, many academic services do not address the specific social and behavioural problems that these individuals face (Farrell, 2004). Additionally, Olney (2000) found that many young adults in a post-secondary setting not only require academic support, but also rehabilitative services (e.g., social support, residential living, and vocational or job coaching). Given these demands and the increase in students reporting ASDs at York University, the Asperger Mentorship Program was developed.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

• Partnership between the Counselling and Disability Services (counsellors) and the Psychology Department (professor and graduate students).

• Identified services offered and services that are needed

• Completed focus group with students with Asperger Syndrome to identify needs

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

YEAR 1 (2007-2008)

- Biweekly Group Meeting
  - Topics initiated by students
  - Weekly individual meetings (1 mentor working with 1 student)
  - Topics initiated by students

YEAR 2 (2008-2009)

- Biweekly Group Meeting
  - Focus on planning and participating in social events
  - Weekly individual meetings (1 mentor working with 1 student)
  - Topics initiated by students

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS (n=6)

- Age Mean=22, Range 20-27
- Gender M=3, F=3
- Living Situation At home: 3
  - With friends: 1
- Employment Unemployed=5
  - Employed=1
- Year at YorkU Range=1-4
- How many classes being taken Range=3-6
- Hobbies School, Writing, playing music, activism (disabilities - ASDs, animals, computers, movies, videogames, sports, games, exercise, hanging out with friends,

Student Perspective

The mentorship program was great! In both the one-on-one sessions and the group meetings, it provided a place to just be myself with friends - without that glass wall that Aspergers ever-so-helpfully provides. For example, I never have to feel awkward for asking if I’m going too far with my comments or if I’m using the wrong body language. I would definitely be happy to participate again this year.

Mentor Perspective

“Experience has helped me to conceptualize how I use my knowledge and clinical experiences in a manner that is not meant to be clinical. It has also helped me to really understand how older individuals on the spectrum experience this phase of life.”

LIMITATIONS

- Increase number of mentors to support increase in student demand
- Reach out to un-identified students with ASDs
- Create more social event opportunities

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We are currently creating a Program Manual for the further development of the AMP at YorkU
To receive a copy of this manual please email amentor@yorku.ca

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DOMAIN

STRENGTHS/WEAKNESSES
- Participation in support and mentorship group for students with ASDs
- Enjoying increased freedom from high school
- Enjoying classes!
- Accessing many resources

CHALLENGES/STRENGTHS
- YorkU STRIKE
- Procrastination
- Organization
- Asking for help
- Balance school and social life

- Anxiety in crowds at school
- Difficult to be accepted by peers
- Finding and maintaining new friends and friendships
- "Being yourself"

STRENGTHS/WEAKNESSES
- Participation in support and mentorship group for students with ASDs
- All students report having more than 5 close friends and keeping in touch with old friends

CHALLENGES/STRENGTHS
- Range 3-5
- Year at YorkU
- How many classes being taken
- Hobbies

STRENGTHS/WEAKNESSES
- Participation in support and mentorship group for students with ASDs
- Keeping in touch with old friends
- Finding and maintaining new friends and friendships
- "Being yourself"

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