

McMullin, Rachel M. and Walton, Kerry R. *Supporting Students on the Autism Spectrum: A Practical Guide for Academic Libraries*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, an Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2019. 144 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4408-6396-7. Softcover, \$65.00.

Titus Belgard, Louisiana State University – Alexandria



This is a slim little volume consisting of six chapters, but it carries quite a punch. It was written because the authors, both of whom work at the West Chester University Library in Pennsylvania, assert that there has been a substantial increase of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) students enrolling in higher education in recent years. However, scholarly literature, particularly professional library literature, has not kept pace in exploring how best to support these students. As a result, colleges and universities increasingly accept ASD students while being underprepared to adequately develop them academically as well as socially.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, an outlet of the U.S. Department of Education, in 2016, approximately 11% of all college and university students have a disability, which encompasses ASD. This number will almost certainly increase in the coming years. Before explaining how academic libraries can best contribute to the ASD segment of the student population's success, the authors ground their work in a concise overview of the autism spectrum. Librarians are given insight into ASD students' cognitive characteristics (encapsulated in the phrase "executive functioning," meaning skills and behaviors college students need to master, such as time

management and taking good notes in class). Insights about social and communication characteristics (such as avoiding eye contact, repetitive behavior, and the use of direct language rather than irony and figures of speech) are also included. The opening chapters also include material on the physical and sensory intimidation that academic libraries can have on ASD students. Such students can easily become distracted and overstimulated, compounding the trouble they have at engaging in social interactions. It is quite refreshing to see two library professionals take the time to examine their library building and appreciate the potential pitfalls an ASD student might experience yet feel reluctant about which to speak.

Chapter 3, “Research Help (and Beyond)” and especially Chapter 4, “Library Instruction,” are the real heart of the book. The authors provide practical, hands-on advice about assisting ASD students at service points within the library. This includes content on the social aspects of research assistance and stresses the need for the academic librarians to present themselves as a friendly, dependable, and welcoming presence in the eyes of the ASD student. Chapter 4 revolves around three main approaches to library instruction. All three are filtered through a model known as Universal Design for Instruction, which means the use of teaching techniques that benefit the largest number of students. These three approaches are “one-shot instruction” (typically an hour-long session), semester-long (or “credit-bearing”) classes, and what is usually the method preferred by ASD students, online instruction. Between these two chapters, the authors present just under 50 pages of material, much of it useful to faculty and students beyond the campus library such as education students working on certification. However, it is of significant use to librarians.

While the authors include some discussion of challenges and weaknesses ASD students possess as student employees, much more space is devoted to examining inherent and underappreciated strengths ASD students bring to the job. Additionally, there are quite a few pages given to advice and recommendations for supervisors of ASD students. This willingness on the part of the authors to think beyond the confines of the college experience—the professor/student relationship and student/staff interactions—and to include material that envisions ASD students as emerging members of the workforce.

The final chapter centers on the need for the campus library and other departments to work in a reciprocal relationship to ensure the success of ASD students and has some notable weaknesses. This chapter has the most repetition and is the most self-referential which is problematic. On a more positive note, the authors emphasize the need on the part of college campuses to promote autism awareness in a holistic, campus-wide manner. Highlighting the role of the library will require library personnel to become proactive in letting other departments, up to and including the administration, know the various services and resources available at the library. Promoting the library so that other departments instinctively think of the library as a center for ASD student support will be an uphill effort.

The authors note that the trend for professional higher education literature discussing ASD students is to ignore the library completely. Out of 14 pages of references, most of which can be accessed online, the authors emphasize only one article not a product of professional library literature that addressed the role of the library. This article is Susan E. Longtin's 2014 piece "Using the College Infrastructure to Support

Students on the Autism Spectrum” published in *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* (which can be accessed through the ERIC database). Moving forward, if faculty, administrators, and staff automatically think of the library as a valuable resource in supporting students with autism, it will only be because librarians make it happen. Academic library directors and anyone aspiring to be an academic library director should consider this book required reading.