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Transcription Jody Gorham, UNB

Introduction: A video in which Jody Gorham, Director of the Student Accessibility Centre at UNB Fredericton, talks about her experiences in accommodating students with autism spectrum disorder.

How did you accommodate a student with a disability in your class?

As the director for the Student Accessibility Centre here at UNB, we serve students with all types of disabilities. We have been finding an increase in the number of students who are registering with us who have a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome which is a disorder on the Autism spectrum. In order to support these students we want instructors to feel as comfortable as possible and like all students that show up in classes, first they have to be treated as individuals. They are often students who are very bright, very capable academically but sometimes have behaviours that are off-putting or odd, peculiar and sometimes that can be frightening for people if they don't understand. So communication and social issues are really the challenge that students with Asperger's Syndrome face in social situations and so anything we can do to support them and to help them learn ways to manage their particular disability is going to help them be successful.

How was the experience from your perspective?

Really, to be honest, we thoroughly enjoy our students who have that particular diagnosis and it's been mostly young men that have been registered with us. You've got to give them a lot of credit for just persevering and taking the risk of coming to university. Often they've had a lot of support from their families and from the public school system and to move to a situation at post-secondary where there's less structure and maybe not the home connection that they've had previously, it's really a scary endeavour. So the accommodations that we're able to put in place for our students with Asperger's tend to be pretty basic ones. Academically they might need a little extra time, a separate location when doing their tests and exams but some don't need that accommodation. Our biggest effort really comes in the area of helping them process social situations, coaching them on how to react and how to behave in social situations. So, if we're able to give them tips on how to behave in a large class environment where sometimes they may want to monopolize the attention of the instructor or they may get stuck on a particular topic and not know that others are rolling their eyes in boredom or disinterest. So just helping them be a little more aware of their own behaviours and how to keep them in check is one suggestion.

What would you say to a colleague who will have a student with a disability in his or her class?

Well, I think it's very important for our instructors to know that these are bright and capable students first and foremost and that if they have social/behavioural issues then we're here to help—the accommodation office can assist. And talking to the student—these students are often very able to give good information on what helps them or things that trigger them and then the instructor, if they are

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aware, can do some advance warning or forecasting with the student. And really, just knowing that group situations are often difficult, then the instructor can be a little more mindful and purposeful about placing students with Asperger's in particular groups, making sure they make good matches, or offering choice so that maybe if being in a social situation in a large group situation or having to spend a lot of time with a lot of other people, they might be able to give an alternate assignment or project so that it reduces some of the anxiety that is often co-morbid, or goes hand-in-hand with having an Asperger's diagnosis.