THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Students

June 2, 2013

Seeking a Deft Touch for Students With Autism-Spectrum Disorders

By Libby Sander
Boston

As more students with autism-spectrum disorders head to college, officials from all corners of the campus play key roles in responding.

That was the message that Karen Berkman, executive director of the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities at the University of South Florida, delivered on Friday to medical and mental-health professionals who gathered here for the American College Health Association's annual meeting.

Autism-spectrum disorders are a range of developmental brain disorders that impair a person's social skills, communication, and behavior. The spectrum includes autism, Asperger syndrome, and several other disorders. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in 110 children has an autism-spectrum disorder. Prevalence of the disorders appears to have increased in recent years, although some researchers say the perceived uptick could result from changes in how the disorders are diagnosed.

People with autism-spectrum disorders tend to display noticeable differences in their behavior. They might speak loudly, stand very close, and be slow to respond in conversation. They can be extremely sensitive to light and noise, and often exhibit mannerisms like rocking and humming.

In college, those compromised social skills can be a significant challenge, Ms. Berkman said. For people with an autism-spectrum disorder, not knowing how to initiate, join, or end a conversation smoothly can be off-putting to others. They also lack a conversational filter, and provide honest, blunt observations at seemingly inappropriate times.

"People on the autism spectrum don't always read those social cues very well," Ms. Berkman said.
Helping students "on the spectrum" at South Florida, she said, has involved collaboration between the university's disability-services office and its counseling center. In many cases, the work has focused on educating faculty and staff members on the needs of students with autism-spectrum disorders: how much the students benefit from routine and structure, say, and the importance of using clear, direct language with students who have no grasp of slang or idioms.

Assistance also means tending to practical considerations, too, she said. Students with autism-spectrum disorders need help registering for classes and understanding, for instance, that choosing a major means being required to take certain classes. Such guidance also includes helping students take on a manageable course load, especially if their "executive functions"—like time management—are severely limited.

Not doing so can exact a steep price, she said. "If you meet with failure right on, you're not going to want to come back."

**At the Health Center**

Communicating with and caring for students with autism-spectrum disorders can require a deft touch.

Joseph Puccio, medical director of South Florida's Student Health Services, offered some practical tips for the clinicians. All communication, he said, should be clear and should use concrete language. If possible, have all medical and insurance forms available electronically or on a Web site so that the students can read and complete them beforehand. (At South Florida, students with autism-spectrum disorders have proofed those documents in advance to alert Dr. Puccio and his staff if there are sentences they don't understand.)

Train your staff to know how to interact with the students, said the doctor, who has worked for years with autistic youths. He offered a worst-case scenario that unfolded in his center one day: The front-desk employee, unfamiliar with how to properly approach students with autism-spectrum disorders, fired question after question at a new patient. Overwhelmed, the patient started screaming.

Once a patient is in the exam room, he said, doctors and nurses should explain everything that's happening, every step of the way. Before starting the exam, he said he always asks, "Do you have any questions?"
"I count to 15 in my head, and then I start slowly and see how they do," Dr. Puccio said. "If they're not getting too anxious about it, I speed the process up."

Sexual health is one of the most delicate topics to discuss with patients, Dr. Puccio said. But it's also among the most important: Because people with an autism-spectrum disorder can be overly sensitive to pain or feel it less than most people, it's critical for doctors to understand what's happening in a student's intimate relationships.

He suggested asking "very direct" questions—no matter how awkward they might be.

"This is not the type of person you can go through and do a sexual history in five minutes," he said. "You definitely can't say things like, 'Are you sexually active?'"

But for all the challenges that caring for students with an autism-spectrum disorder might present, Dr. Puccio said, there is one significant asset they bring as patients: honesty.

"Students who are not autistic," he said, "are going to lie to get out of the room faster."