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Neurodiversity Goes to College

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The conversation started as reception conversations typically do: names, personal CSB and SJU stories, then family connections and history.

This mom related that her son is a current Johnnie. He is having a great experience, for which the family is very grateful. They were not sure this would be the case, despite a deep knowledge of Saint John's and Saint Ben's—a couple uncles and an aunt are graduates and his family had lived in this area for the current Johnnie's whole life.

I must have looked perplexed at this scenario, though I did not say anything. His mom then said, "We were worried about the transition to college because my son is on the autism spectrum. We were especially concerned about the social challenges."

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often affects communication and social skills and can make some everyday interactions more complicated and even fraught, as has been noted recently in the [higher education press](#).

Like most high functioning autistic students, her son had the talent and desire to pursue a college degree. There was never a question of *if* he would go, but the question was *where*? Her son had his college choice narrowed down to Saint John's and another Minnesota private school. He had set up a matrix of pros and cons for the two schools with the usual entries: cost, location, academic offerings, outcomes, facilities, etc. What he did not include, maybe unsurprisingly for a young man on the autism spectrum, were social environment and community, though to be fair, these are hard to quantify or judge for virtually all prospective

students. Every school offers some sense of community and the social environment can be difficult to assess from the outside. In the end, using his own analysis, her son chose Saint John's and enrolled.

He was assigned a roommate whom he did not know. For someone who is not adept at reading social cues and can find new social situations confusing and even painful, dorm life, which is not simple in the best of times – requiring living with dozens of strangers – is among the most daunting aspects of college life.

This Johnnie reported that he and his roommate got along fine. While they did not have a lot in common and did not continue as roommates after freshman year, they shared their dorm room amicably, and the young man said he learned that not all students took his approach to college. He found that his roommate was not as focused on academic responsibilities as the ASD Johnnie was. Social activities seemed more important—something the ASD Johnnie continues to find curious. “Why would someone spend so much money on college and not focus on academics?” But overall, the roommate experience was positive from the student's and his family's point of view.

In the classroom, the ASD Johnnie was well-prepared and, as is true when students get into their majors, mostly got to pick courses that played to his academic strengths. What was especially helpful was that a faculty member recognized this young man's strengths in math and science and, after completing the professor's course, the young man was asked to assist in grading homework and tutoring other students.

From my conversation with the mother, it was unclear whether the professor knew that the Johnnie was on the autism spectrum, though it seems likely an experienced faculty member would know. In any case, a professor seeking a tutor for students in his or her classes would certainly consider the social skills of the tutor. It was clear to professor and student alike that the social interactions involved in tutoring were going to stretch this Johnnie, regardless of whether the faculty member knew of the formal ASD diagnosis.

However, both the professor and the Johnnie were up for the challenge. The tutoring has gone well for both parties as well as the tutees over several semesters, and it also helped the young man discern that teaching was probably not the right career path for him. While successfully helping his peers, he reported that he did not always understand why those he was helping didn't

find the material as easy as he did.

The mother also reported that her son had found students “with similar interests” on campus and that her son had a roommate and a group of friends. Social interactions are still not easy, but her son is both making social progress and is happily on track to complete his degree with his classmates. These outcomes were not foregone conclusion as this young man began college, and, for these successes, his parents and grandparents are deeply appreciative of the community that welcomed and embraced this ASD Johnnie.



Listening to this mom’s story was an obvious reminder of the increasing diversity on our campuses. As one interacts with Johnnies and Bennies today, there is the obvious racial, ethnic and religious diversity, as well as slightly less obvious geographic and economic diversity. And then there is the diversity that is more subtle and often hidden: mental health diversity, learning challenges diversity and, in the case of the Johnnie described here,

neurodiversity.

Each student brings his or her own story to our community and each has a unique mix of strengths, gifts and challenges that are part of their undergraduate journey. Our institutions have dedicated greater human resources in the form of faculty time and staff positions to help our increasingly diverse students, but this story speaks to a larger truth about how our community welcomes each individual and then makes them a part of the community. The freshman roommate who likely found his new roommate quirky but accepted him as he was; the faculty member who took a chance on hiring an autistic teaching assistant; and the dozens of others who interacted with the ASD Johnnie in respectful and loving ways, all participated, knowingly or not, in making our community welcoming to this young man.

We may not do it perfectly for every individual, but our lived Benedictine ethos, in the form of many small kindnesses that are second nature to so many, allow diversity to grow and flourish at Saint John’s and Saint Ben’s.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | January 11th, 2019 | Categories: [Higher Education](#), [Kudos](#) | [0 Comments](#)
