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Expert: changes needed to make autistic students more successful in college

By JACKSON FRENCH jfrench@bgdailynews.com 14 hrs ago



An autism expert highlighted what colleges can do to assist students with autism during a speech Wednesday at Western Kentucky University.

Jane Thierfeld Brown, an assistant clinical professor at the Yale Child Study Center and director of College Autism Spectrum – an organization that helps students with autism and their families – spoke at WKU’s Jody Richards Hall about the hurdles college students with autism face.

For people with autism, many of their difficulties stem from a fundamental difference in the way they think.

While most people do not consciously think about most of the things they perceive day to day, individuals with autism are much more aware of what others would consider to be minor details.

“If you’re someone with autism, almost 100 percent of incoming stimuli is processed consciously and it’s overwhelming,” she said. “It’s difficult to know what to focus on.”

Because of this, structure is important in the lives of those with autism, Brown said. The needs for students with autism tend to go unmet in college because of the lack of structure, she said, when compared to the high school experience.

“In high school, you’re structured for about 12 hours a day between what’s required at school and family structure and everything goes on in your after-school activities ... but then you move on to college and you’re structured for about 12 to 15 hours a week,” she said.

Federal law requires schools up to high school to provide a free education that accommodates a child’s needs, though this isn’t the case in college, Brown said.

“Where in high school, the program had to fit the child, in college the student has to fit the program,” she said.

Student codes of conduct are often unhelpful for students with autism because they lay out what students aren’t supposed to do rather than guidelines for what constitutes appropriate behavior, Brown said.

Because the structure of what is considered acceptable is not laid out more thoroughly, students with autism often don’t know what is expected, she said. For example, some autistic students have been accused of stalking because they don’t understand following others isn’t seen as acceptable, she said.

“What I’m encouraging universities to do is take that conduct code and reverse it from negative to positive to give people bullets on how they should act rather than just saying you may not, you may not, you may not,” she said.

When he introduced Brown at the presentation, David Brinkley, director of educational telecommunications, touted WKU’s Kelly Autism Program and the David Brinkley Student Employment Fellowship, which provides scholarship funds to employ students on the autism spectrum within WKU Public Broadcasting.

Brown praised the Kelly Autism Program when she spoke to the Daily News after the presentation.

“You have a wonderful program that’s been a leader in the country in providing support services for students on the spectrum,” she said.

Brown cited the range of support services for students’ social and academic lives, including a mental health counselor just for students with autism, as admirable aspects of the program.

Brown described the employment fellowship as the “first of its kind” and expressed hope that it could be replicated in other universities.

“It’s phenomenal because it’s giving people exposure to the world of employment,” she said.

Hannah Wilcutt, who works at WKU PBS, said she decided to come to Brown’s presentation after hearing some of her co-workers talk about it.

Hearing the discussion reminded her of a student in a class she takes who sometimes talks about his own experiences with autism, Wilcutt said, adding that she wanted to gain more insight into the condition.

“I guess I just kind of made that connection in my mind and decided to come,” she said.

The main thing that stuck out to Wilcutt was the differences in the way people on the autism spectrum and people without autism think.

Wilcutt called attention to a comparison Brown made about people with autism focusing on small details while others tend to think more about the big picture. “I am the exact opposite,” she said. “I will see the big picture. I guess you could say I see the forest but not the tree.”

Alex Smith, a WKU student on the autism spectrum, also attended the presentation.

Though Smith said he was only recently diagnosed with autism and hasn’t faced many difficulties at WKU because of the condition, he said he liked the sound of providing more structure to students with autism.

“I’m an economics major so I was wondering how it would be paid for, but I do think it’s a good idea to tailor it to people with my condition,” he said.

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