



Autism 101 for Faculty Provided Tools and Professional Development

Dr. Lindi Smith - 1/30/2019



Bart Barta speaks about Autism 101 at Richland College on Thursday, Jan. 17.

Return week is a busy time of any semester and usually includes multiple opportunities for professional development. One Spring 2019 professional development event at Richland College was the Autism 101 for Faculty Workshop presented by Bart Barta.

On Thursday, Jan. 17, more than 250 faculty, staff and administrators from across the district gathered to hear Barta speak about meeting the unique needs of students with autism. "The Autism 101 for Faculty Workshop ... was a great success," said Dr. Shannon Cunningham, executive vice president of academic affairs and student success at Richland. "I was so pleased to hear feedback from faculty and staff that they learned much from Mr. Barta and felt the workshop was tremendously beneficial."

The workshop began with a welcome by Dr. Sha-shonda Porter, associate dean of world languages, cultures and communications at Richland, who championed the college's efforts to equitably serve all students. She then went on to introduce Barta, a former law enforcement officer who "has trained officers and first responders all over the nation."

Barta created Autism Safety 101 to teach first responders how to communicate and engage more effectively with people who have autism. His goal all along was to increase understanding and awareness about autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a developmental disorder with which he has a significant personal connection. His son, Daniel, was diagnosed with ASD as a young child.

[Read more about Barta and his mission to increase autism awareness.](#)

Important Facts About ASD

[According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), "Autism spectrum disorder is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges."

Barta often describes autism as an "invisible disability" because it sometimes can be difficult to see and because its prevalence is higher than most people might guess. The CDC reports that, as of April 2018, one in every 59 children in the United States has ASD. Autism is also four times more likely to occur in boys than in girls.

"ASD occurs in all racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups," noted Barta. "It's a diverse community within a diverse community."

Understanding the prevalence of ASD is one of the key things that will most likely resonate with faculty, according to Dr. Sha-shonda Porter. "There are a significant number of people affected by ASD. I believe it is also important to understand that the ASD community is quite diverse and that not everyone presents in the same way," said Porter.

Dr. Shannon Cunningham added, "I think for many of our employees, a better understanding of autism spectrum disorder is the foundation for better serving this population of students."

For Melinda Andrews, a Richland College faculty member, "The most helpful tip that Bart Barta provided is to know that we have autistic students in our classes that do not self-report or go through Disability Services. They may have sensory issues to sounds, smells and lights in the classroom. They will more than likely have anxiety issues, may be uncomfortable with social interactions and are capable of great things."

Students with ASD may exhibit behavioral challenges like increased anxiety and difficulty communicating. While no two people with ASD share the same characteristics or face the exact same challenges, [learning about some of the behavioral challenges that are commonly associated with ASD can help educators better meet the needs of students with autism.](#)

Tips and Strategies for Faculty

Barta showed a video to the audience to provide some tools for educators to use in the classroom when students with ASD exhibit certain behaviors. The video featured Ben Liske, an 18-year-old junior at Trinity College who has ASD.

Liske outlined five tips for faculty to help students with ASD:

1. **Office hours:** Make them concrete and keep them.
2. **Classroom etiquette:** Suggest a different action for students who distract others.
3. **Attention:** Allow students to take notes, draw or simply avoid eye contact. In other words, don't assume they're not listening just because they are not making eye contact.
4. **Visual tools:** Have more visuals, not just a lecture, and incorporate as many senses as possible.
5. **Keep the peace:** Keep the classroom environment conducive to learning and tell students when they're being disruptive. Just have a conversation with them and communicate authentically.

Another important tip Barta advocated is the use of universal design for all types of learners. To learn more about how to incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into your classroom, visit udlcenter.org.

How Else Can Educators Support Students With ASD?

At the end of his talk, Barta fielded a few questions from the audience. Most of the questions centered on the same basic premise, which was a genuine desire from those present to support students with ASD in the best ways possible.

Barta advocated for three key things for educators to remember when working with students on the spectrum:

"Provide clarity, be proactive and be understanding."

"People with autism are a rich part of this diversity we call the college community," he said. "Just because people have disabilities doesn't mean they can't make valuable additions to society."

"If nothing else, as a parent of a child with autism ... they don't want your sympathy. All they want is some empathy. Empathy is one of those perishing skills in modern society. Practice some empathy with these students to help them succeed." For Barta, empathy in this context is really all about communicating that you understand a student with ASD has unique needs and then working with that student to meet those needs.

This thought was echoed by Dr. Sha-shonda Porter, who said, "Bart shared a lot of great information, but it seems that effective communication is going to be key to understanding and supporting our students who have ASD."

If you would like to learn more about Bart Barta and Autism Safety 101, visit autismsafety101.com.