Laurie Ackles, director of the Spectrum Support Program at the Rochester Institute of Technology, provides ongoing support to students with autism spectrum disorder to help them prepare for the workforce.

A What challenges do students with autism spectrum disorder need to prepare for when they enter the workforce?

Being prepared to work in teams in a work setting can be tricky. Sometimes individuals on the spectrum can be seen as difficult to work with. They aren’t trying to be difficult, but sometimes they challenge people, interrupt or blurt things out.

Office politics will also be a challenge. Workers need to understand why it’s important to ask “How was your weekend?” even if they don’t really care. And executive functioning skills can be a challenge. Being able to prioritize, focus, and respond to frustration appropriately are critical skills.

Q What support is most helpful for students during the job search?

All students at RIT fulfill co-op requirements that provide them with work experience in their field. The Spectrum Support Program offers three seminars that prepare students to be successful finding and keeping a position. The courses are noncredit and pass/fail. But it’s important for them to be set up as courses that appear on the students’ schedules so that instructors know the students will come.

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Q As second-semester freshmen, students take a 15-week course that teaches them how to choose positions, they participate in a co-op lab, which is taught one-on-one in a computer lab. They get help identifying positions that might suit them and writing cover letters.

The faculty start discussions about when, how and whether to disclose that they have autism spectrum disorder early on. That decision is highly individualized. Sometimes students can disclose during the interview when they are talking about their strengths. Some students need to disclose that they are on the spectrum during the interview or the interviewer will think they are unfocused or disinterested.

And throughout the courses, the faculty help them work on issues that are challenging for students with autism spectrum disorder such as what their body language is saying.

Ackles recommends authors Barbara Bissonnette and Michelle Garcia Winner to students so that they can learn more about getting and keeping a job and about social thinking.