

Guidelines for College Success

CHAPTER 5: POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

The ITP may include goals for further education, depending on the abilities and interests of your young adult. Working together, you and your child will decide the most appropriate goal, but the inputs for getting there successfully will always be the same: measurable goal, interim steps, clear desired outcome, and proper support. This chapter discusses how to find the right match for your young adult with ASD and how to make sure the process is beneficial for everyone involved.

The transition to a college environment can be difficult for many individuals with ASD. However, with preparation and transition planning, the process can be customized for your young adult, thereby increasing the potential for success.

Preparing for Postsecondary Education—Where to Go and What to Study

If postsecondary education is a goal for your young adult, then your young adult's transition plan should include preparatory work for proficiency tests and assessments, such as the SATs. Also, the transition planning process should help you and your young adult identify his academic strengths to better determine a match between his interests and a school.

Begin exploring early. Help your young adult look into potential summer courses at a community college or explore other options, such as technical or trade schools in your area. Meet and network with current students and attend an information meeting at a local college. The more you can prepare your young adult for the college environment and experience, the more effective his transition will be.

Choosing the Right School

Deciding on a college is a milestone for all teens—and your young adult with ASD is no exception. Finding the right match for your young adult with ASD will be key to his success, and many types of programs are available that may accommodate his needs. Consider all the options, set your requirements, and then narrow the field of candidates. You can use the checklist in Appendix H for evaluating colleges as you begin your search:

Vocational school, community college, technical institute, state school, or a smaller liberal arts school may all be good options, depending on your young adult's area of interest.

Certificate programs may provide good training in an area of interest.

Some individuals with ASD may prefer 2-year community colleges to start out because they can live at home yet begin the postsecondary process. However, at the end of these 2 years, he may want to transfer to a 4-year college, which would require, minimally, some degree of transition



planning to identify and address the potential challenges and stressors associated with the new educational environment.

You may want to work with a guidance counselor during this process to explore all available options.

You may want to visit particular schools and meet with admissions counselors, as they will be the best able to provide you and your young adult with more detailed information.

Orientation programs at schools or even the Internet provide a lot of detailed information to determine the most appropriate choice for your young adult.

Once you and your child have determined a specific program or university, it is important to determine what services they may offer to help your young adult with ASD. Most, if not all, colleges and universities have a department that specializes in ensuring compliance with both ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Find out what types of disability-related resources they offer their students, and the process to access these accommodations. By becoming familiar with the system and the services provided, your young adult will be more adequately prepared to advocate for himself, increasing the chances for success.

Self-Advocacy: A Key Skill in a College Environment

Additional Skills Your Child Will Rely on in College or Further Education

Organization and time management: Identify these skills (generally referred to as “executive function skills”) as goals in your child’s transition plan to develop them before college.

Organizing assignments, managing time, setting priorities, and breaking projects down into steps are all key skills to assist your child in a postsecondary setting.

Independent living skills: Your child may be living on his own at college, and tasks such as laundry, money management, cleaning, problem solving, living with a roommate, sexual safety, etc., will take on a greater relevance than they had in high school. These skills should be developed before the first day of college with the help of occupational therapists or other service providers available to your child.

Once your son is accepted into college, the role of advocate needs to fall less on you and far more, if not fully, on him. In fact, self-advocacy skills are considered so critical to your child’s success in college that many such institutions do not even have a mechanism by which you, as the parent, may advocate on their behalf. As such, it is of critical importance that you prepare your child with self-advocacy skills to help him communicate his needs to the appropriate person in the appropriate manner. (Public universities generally have an office of “Disability Support Services,” which is the best place for him to begin.) You can begin the process of promoting effective self-advocacy by reviewing the types and intensities of services and supports that were useful in high school and explaining how they might be beneficial in college.

Aside from knowing what supports your young adult's needs, he must now effectively communicate these needs. Certain skills or, more accurately, skill sets are critical to the process:

How and when to disclose:

- Your young adult is an expert on his experience of being a person on the spectrum and has a unique opportunity to let others know, to the extent possible and appropriate, what it is like. In addition, it is important for him to understand that disclosure is not an "all or nothing" proposition. Each individual will need to learn both how and when to disclose, in addition to how much information he needs to disclose, in what format, and to what end. Disclosure is a much more complex and personal process than simply saying, "I have autism spectrum disorder."
- Even young adults with fewer skills and more complex learning or behavioral challenges can effectively and appropriately disclose by (as one example) using preprinted information cards that they may hand out.

A broad understanding of his rights:

- Discuss with your young adult what rights and protections are afforded to him under IDEA, ADA, and Section 504. Work with him to better define what, in his particular case, may constitute a "reasonable accommodation" in the college classroom.
- Discuss the rights of others in his classes, dorms, and related social activities. How might your young adult best be able to balance out these often competing agendas?
- Learning to be a good advocate requires practice. Role-plays, social scripts, and video modeling may be useful here.

If you don't ask, you won't know:

The social world of college is sometimes confusing, even for your young adult's neurotypical peers. A good advocacy strategy therefore is if you are confused, if you do not understand why something is happening or happened, ask a trusted person.

Finding out as much as possible about "new" situations (e.g., attending a first concert) by asking questions beforehand can effectively reduce later problems.

Shore, S. (Ed.). (2004). *Ask and tell: Self-advocacy and disclosure for people on the autism spectrum*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

The above information was taken from chapter 5 (Postsecondary Education) of OAR's 2006 [Life Journey Through Autism: A Guide for Transition to Adulthood](#).