



# POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Working together, you and your autistic young adult will decide the most appropriate postsecondary goals. Achieving them will always involve the same planning elements: measurable goals, interim steps, clear desired outcomes, and appropriate supports. With proper preparation and transition planning, the process can be customized for your young adult, thereby increasing the potential for success. This chapter discusses how to find the right match for your autistic young adult and how to make sure the process is beneficial for everyone involved.

## PREPARING FOR POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION – WHERE TO GO AND WHAT TO STUDY

If postsecondary education is a goal for your young adult and the schools they are considering require proficiency tests, such as the SAT or ACT, their transition plan should include preparatory work for these assessments. They can work with their special education case manager or guidance counselor to request accommodations when registering for standardized testing.

The transition planning process should help identify your child's academic strengths to better determine a match between their 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, to see what is a good fit. 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 their transition will be.

### Choosing the Right School

Deciding on a postsecondary program is a milestone for all teens, and your autistic young adult is no exception. Finding the right match is the key to success, and many types of programs are



available that may accommodate their needs. Consider all the options, set your requirements, and then narrow the field of candidates. You can use the checklist in **Activity 5-1: Comparing Postsecondary Programs** (on page 77) for evaluating colleges as you begin your search. Here are some general suggestions and things to consider:

- ▶ 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 skills and areas of interest.
- ▶ Certificate programs may provide good training in an area of interest. These programs are sometimes less expensive and time-consuming than vocational schools.
- ▶ Some autistic individuals prefer two-year community colleges to start out because they can live at home. However, at the end of these two years, they may wish to transfer to a four-year college. Such a move will require, minimally, some degree of transition planning to identify and address the potential challenges and stressors associated with the new educational environment.
- ▶ If your autistic young adult would benefit from a curriculum that focuses on developing independent living skills, job skills, and self-determination, consider starting with a life skills program or autism transition program. You may want to work with a guidance counselor during this process to explore all available options.
- ▶ You and your young adult may want to visit particular schools and programs and meet with admissions counselors to gain more detailed information.
- ▶ Orientation programs at schools or even on the internet provide a lot of detailed information to help 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 support services they offer. 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. Some colleges offer general disability services, some have autism-specific services or college support programs, and in some areas, independent agencies provide support to college students.

Find out what types of disability-related resources colleges offer their students and how to access these accommodations. By becoming familiar with the system and the services provided, your young adult will be better prepared to advocate for themselves, thereby increasing their chances for success.

## SELF-ADVOCACY: A KEY SKILL IN A COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT

Once your young adult is accepted into college, the role of advocate needs to fall less on you and far more, if not fully, on them. In fact, self-advocacy skills are considered so critical to suc-



cess in college that many institutions don't even have a mechanism by which you, as the parent, can advocate on their behalf. In college, the student is the main advocate. Therefore, it is essential that your young adult is prepared with self-advocacy skills to help them communicate their needs to the appropriate person in the appropriate manner. (Public universities generally have an office of Disability Support Services, which is the best place to begin.)

OAR's *Finding Your Way: A College Guide for Students on the Spectrum* is a great resource for autistic college-bound students: <https://www.researchautism.org/how-we-help/self-advocates/college>.



The process of promoting effective self-advocacy starts by reviewing the types and intensities of services and supports that were useful to your child in high school and explaining how they might be beneficial in college. Aside from knowing what supports they need, your autistic young adult must be able to effectively communicate these needs. Certain skills or, more accurately, skill sets, are critical to the process, including:

- ▶ How, when, and to whom to disclose:
  - ▷ Much like disclosing one's autism in the job search and subsequently the workplace, your college-bound young adult will face similar decisions in the college environment. Your young adult is an expert on their experience of being autistic and has a unique opportunity to let others know, to the extent possible and appropriate, what it is like. This may be especially important when working with professors. In addition, it is important to understand that disclosure is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Each individual will need to learn both how and when (or if) to disclose, and how much information they need to disclose, in what format, and to what end. In short, disclosure is a much more complex and personal process than simply saying, "I am autistic."
  - ▷ Disclosing to a professor and receiving appropriate accommodations can make the difference between academic success and failure. Disclosure to peers and classmates, on the other hand, may be much more selective and have a range of positive and social ramifications.
  - ▷ Even autistic young adults with fewer skills and more complex learning or behavioral challenges can effectively and appropriately disclose by (as one example) handing out preprinted information cards.
- ▶ A broad understanding of their rights:
  - ▷ Discuss with your young adult what rights and protections are afforded to them under IDEA, ADA, and Section 504. Work with them to better define what, in their particular case, may constitute a "reasonable accommodation" in the college classroom.
  - ▷ Discuss the rights of others in their classes, dorms, and related social activities. How might your young adult best balance out these often competing agendas?

- ▶ Learning to be an effective advocate requires practice. Role-plays, social scripts, and video modeling may be useful here.
- ▶ If you don't ask, you won't know (Shore, 2004):
  - ▶ The social world of college is sometimes confusing, even for neurotypicals. A good advocacy strategy for your young adult, therefore, is to ask a trusted person if they are confused or if they don't understand why something is happening or has happened.
  - ▶ Finding out as much as possible about "new" situations (e.g., attending a first concert) by asking questions beforehand can effectively reduce later problems.

## SKILLS ESSENTIAL TO COLLEGE SUCCESS

In addition to self-advocacy skills, your young adult needs to rely on many key skills to succeed in the college environment, such as organization, time management, and independent living skills.

- ▶ *Organization and time management:* Identify these skills (generally referred to as "executive function skills") as goals in your child's transition plan so there is time to develop them before college. Knowing how to organize assignments, manage time, set priorities, and break larger projects down into steps is critical for success in a post-secondary setting.
- ▶ *Independent living skills:* If your young adult is living on their own at college, tasks such as laundry, money management, cleaning, problem solving, health and wellness, transportation, stress management, etc., will take on a greater relevance than they had in high school. These skills can be developed before the first day of college with the help of occupational therapists or other service providers.

Finally, your young adult may encounter social challenges that are magnified in the college environment. Talk to them about topics such as peer pressure, alcohol and drug use, sexual safety, social media/cyber safety, and conflict resolution with roommates. For detailed tips on how to address these issues, refer to the list of books and websites at the end of this chapter.

## SETTING UP – AND USING – SUPPORT SERVICES

It is important to keep in mind that the protections once offered by the IEP and the transition plan will no longer be available as entitlements in a postsecondary setting. Universities do not have a responsibility to identify students with disabilities or determine what supports they need. **You and your young adult are responsible for seeking out the protections, provided**



by **Section 504 and ADA**, from disability-based discrimination (see Chapter 1). Your young adult must disclose their disability and prepare the necessary documents in order to request certain accommodations and services to help them fully participate in classes and other activities (e.g., extra test-taking time, ability to audio record lectures). Failure to do so blocks your young adult from receiving accommodations that could make the difference in their college experience. (**Note:** While some colleges or universities allow the student to complete a form designating a parent as the primary advocate, this is not the norm and, in some cases, is not even appropriate.)

Here are some suggestions for getting the support your young adult needs from their college (Sicile-Kira, 2006):

- ▶ Locate an experienced guidance counselor or student services staff member who can advocate for your young adult throughout their college career. Such support may come in the form of information about services on campus, introductions to groups on campus with shared interests, recommendations of professors who may be more willing than others to provide accommodations, and so on.
- ▶ Provide the college (professors, counselors, resident assistants, etc.) with information about autism and how it affects your young adult, specifically challenges they face and strategies that can be used to assist them. Developing a one-page “fact sheet” about autism and characteristics specific to your young adult may be helpful.
- ▶ Be sure your young adult discusses the options for taking exams with their professor at the start of the semester. Exams may be modified based on your young adult’s particular needs; for example, professors may provide extended time or make exams untimed.
- ▶ Suggest that your young adult continue to use the strategies that worked in high school, such as written schedules, visual aids, recording lectures, and other accommodations.
- ▶ Explore student organizations on campus that may be of interest to your young adult (gaming club, recreational sport, etc.). This may be a place where they can make friends and talk to trusted peers about navigating college life. Some campuses have clubs led by and run by autistic students. If such a club doesn’t exist, your young adult may consider starting one.

Further education will open up a whole new realm of possibilities for your young adult’s future. While it will be tough for you to let them go – probably tougher than for the parent of a neurotypical child – it is important for you to avoid being a hovering parent and let your young adult have some freedom to explore their new environment. If postsecondary education is a realistic goal for your autistic young adult, preparation and planning can make this process go smoothly, and it will help to relieve some of *your* worries.

## RESOURCES

- ▶ Autism Self Advocacy Network. (2013). *Navigating college: A handbook on self-advocacy written for autistic students from autistic adults*. The Autistic Press.
- ▶ Brown, J.T. et al. (2012). *The parent's guide to college for students on the autism spectrum*. AAPC Publishing.
- ▶ College Autism Spectrum: <https://www.collegeautismspectrum.com/collegeprograms/>
- ▶ Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston. *Think College*. <https://www.thinkcollege.net>
- ▶ Organization for Autism Research. (n.d.). *College central* (for autistic young adults): <https://www.bit.ly/OARCollege>
- ▶ Organization for Autism Research. (n.d.). *Professor's guide to Asperger Syndrome*. <https://www.researchautism.org/resources/understanding-asperger-syndrome-a-professors-guide/>
- ▶ Palmer, A. (2005). *Realizing the college dream with autism or Asperger syndrome: A parent's guide to student success*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- ▶ Shore, S. (Ed.). (2004). *Ask and tell: Self-advocacy and disclosure for people on the autism spectrum*. Autism Asperger Publishing Company.
- ▶ Sicile-Kira, C. (2006). *Adolescents on the autism spectrum: A parent's guide to the cognitive, social, physical, and transition needs of teenagers with autism spectrum disorders*. The Berkeley Publishing Group.
- ▶ U.S. Department of Education. (2011). *Students with disabilities preparing for postsecondary education: Know your rights and responsibilities*. <https://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html>

### KEY POINTS – CHAPTER 5



Transition plans can include preparatory work towards postsecondary education goals.



Unlike high school, students are responsible for actively advocating for themselves in college.



It is essential to practice self-advocacy skills prior to and during postsecondary education; these skills may include, but are not limited to, determining when, how, and to whom to disclose and advocating for one's educational rights.



Other key skills for success in postsecondary education include organization, time management, and independent living.



Many programs and schools offer autism-specific services or college support programs that will match your child's needs.

Chapter 5: Handouts/Activities ▷