

COUNSELOR DEVELOPMENT

College Readiness and Transition for Students on the Spectrum

By Eric Endlich, Ph.D.



Elena was looking forward to studying marine biology at a liberal arts college. Midway through her first semester she became overwhelmed by the social and academic demands, she stopped attending class and moved back home in a state of depression. The only job she has held since then is volunteering at an animal shelter.

Marcus was able to complete a bachelor's degree in European history and had a steady girlfriend in college; however, after graduation, he moved back in with his parents as well and has been working a minimum-wage job in a clothing store for the past ten years. What do these bright, yet underemployed young adults have in common? They are both on the autism spectrum.

Every year, 50,000 autistic students graduate high school in the U.S., and at least a third of them go on to college (Shattuck, et al., 2012; Wei, et al., 2015). However, they have strikingly low rates of graduation and subsequent employment (Newman, et al., 2011). In order to succeed, they need to develop college readiness skills and receive adequate supports and services. Simply being able to get accepted into college is not enough. Fortunately, high school and independent counselors can play a key role in helping students fashion a plan for developing college readiness.

Emotional Readiness

Let's start with mental health. Most autistic students are likely to suffer from one or more other conditions such as anxiety or depression (Belardinelli, Raza & Taneli, 2016). For a successful

transition to college, students should:

- ▶ Know what conditions they have that might "flare up" under stress, such as substance abuse, OCD or eating disorders.
- ▶ Be able to spot the early signs of relapse, such as missing classes, excessive gaming or urges to self-harm.
- ▶ Have "go-to" strategies to manage these conditions, such as exercise, meditation or journaling.
- ▶ Be familiar with--and access--appropriate resources such as on-campus or off-site counseling, support groups or medication prescribers.

Executive Function Readiness

Likewise, many of these students have difficulty with executive functioning skills, such as planning, organization, and time management. If they have been relying on parents, teachers or other professionals to help them manage in high school, they will need to come up with a plan to address these areas in college as well. That plan could include a combination of:

- ▶ Beginning to do these tasks independently (e.g., making their own doctor's appointments).
- ▶ Planning for a gap year after high school and attending a college readiness program during this time--or at the very least, during the summer before college.

- ▶ Hiring professionals to provide academic coaching while in college.
- ▶ Selecting higher ed institutions with comprehensive support programs.

Accommodations in College

Students who receive accommodations in high school such as extra time on tests should review with their counselors whether they expect to need similar accommodations in college. If so, it will be important for them to:

- Confirm that the colleges they are interested in can provide these accommodations.
- Ensure that they have the proper documentation required by the colleges.
- Be prepared to self-advocate for these accommodations with the accessibility services office and their future professors.
- Consider what additional accommodations in college might be beneficial, such as a single room in the residence hall.

Autism Supports in College



The range of supports and services available varies greatly between colleges. Counselors should work with families to determine what level of support students are likely to need, and to encourage students to access these supports.

- A basic level of support includes disability accommodations (provided at all colleges by federal law) as well as free peer tutoring, a writing center and a counseling center with free group and/or individual services available. Students with excellent self-advocacy skills and the ability to socialize and manage their studies independently may find this level of support sufficient.

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National Autistic Indicators Report

- ☑ About 50,000 autistic students turn 18 annually
- ☑ About ⅓ of these students go to college
- ☑ About 70% of those who do go to college go to a 2-year college
- ☑ Likelihood of attendance correlates with conversational ability as well as family income
- ☑ Probability of attending college was higher if at least one parent had done so, too
- ☑ Those with other disabilities attend (e.g., LD) college at higher rates
- ☑ All received SPED in HS, but ⅓ felt they had no disability
- ☑ Of those who disclosed disability in college, less than half received help
- ☑ Most common accommodations/services: testing accommodations, human aides, assignment accommodations, material adapt., physical adapt.

Primary Needs Identified by Needs Analysis across Online Surveys and Focus Groups:

1. Over-arching construct
2. Specific facets
3. Social integration
4. Navigating social interactions
5. Finding social support
6. Handling conflict with others
7. Self-determination
8. Finding transition services
9. Self-advocacy
10. Time management
11. Sustaining or developing social motivation
12. Goal attainment
13. Self-awareness and knowledge
14. Independent living skills
15. Self-regulation: Managing social, daily living, and social concerns
16. Navigating inconsistencies and changes in routine
17. Managing intense emotions
18. Executive functioning (e.g., managing inattention)
19. Coping with academic stress

- A moderate level of support would include the above plus individual academic coaching for study skills (e.g., time management). Coaching may or may not involve an additional fee. Students who have significant executive function challenges, but adequate social skills may be a good match for colleges with this level of support.
- A comprehensive support program would include the above services in a coordinated way, plus social events, individual coaching or group workshops for social/academic/life skills and autism-specific career services. While virtually all colleges offer career services, students on the autism spectrum often benefit from specialized services in this area, particularly around interviewing skills; they generally benefit from social skills workshops and events as well. While some institutions charge no additional fee for comprehensive programs, others charge as much as \$10-15,000 per year. Initial results from these programs are very promising (Hillier, et al., 2017; Rowe, Charles & Dubose, 2020), though long-term data on their effectiveness is limited (Nachman, 2020).

Autistic teens can thrive in college whether they master the necessary skills in high school, while in college or during a gap year. Counselors working with the student in high school should determine which additional readiness skills the student needs to acquire, then formulate a plan for the student to develop these skills and obtain the necessary services in college. This approach can pave the way to college graduation and a successful career beyond.

For an extensive list of college autism support programs, go to topcollegeconsultants.com.

Founder of Top College Consultants®, Dr. Eric Endlich is a clinical psychologist and independent educational consultant who helps students worldwide transition to college. Dr. Endlich is on the LD/ND Committee of the Independent Educational Consultants Association and the clinical advisory board of the Asperger/Autism Network. Co-author of a forthcoming book on autistic adults, he presents nationwide at conferences on autism and higher education. Dr. Endlich is also an autism parent and autistic adult. His extensive list of autism-friendly colleges and universities can be found at topcollegeconsultants.com.

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