

Transition to College: What Autism Parents Need to Know

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If you're wondering whether your child on the spectrum can go to college, the answer is: Absolutely! About 50,000 students with autism graduate from high school in the United States every year, and more than a third of them go on to college.¹

Many teens on the spectrum are bright, hardworking students. When they earn top grades in challenging courses, it is reasonable to assume they are *capable* of college-level work, too. In fact, sometimes they demonstrate their academic prowess by earning college credit while in high school through Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate or dual-enrollment community college courses. As a result, colleges admit them in substantial numbers.

It's important, however, to understand the difference between *college-capable* and *college-ready*. The fact that these teens are *admitted* doesn't mean they're *ready* for college. Unfortunately, many of them never graduate.² Some don't even make it through the first year. In order to make it to graduation, college students need to be capable of a range of skills and habits. These include:

- Getting up on time for classes
- Eating consistently
- Getting enough sleep
- Managing personal hygiene independently
- Doing laundry regularly
- Making doctor's appointments
- Taking medication consistently
- Cohabiting successfully with a roommate
- Making new friends
- Participating actively in class discussions
- Self-advocating with faculty and staff
- Managing an unstructured schedule
- Keeping track of assignments
- Doing extensive reading
- Writing long papers
- Meeting deadlines
- Seeking out tutors as needed
- Meeting with advisors
- Registering for courses
- Managing moods while living away from home
- Avoiding addictive behavior patterns



Teens who have mastered many of these tasks while still in high school have an excellent chance of thriving in college. Those who have not, however, may face daunting hurdles. As a psychologist, I encountered teens who didn't make it through college because they were unprepared. This influenced me to become an educational consultant to assist families with college readiness and transition. I discovered that there are several paths to success in higher education for autistic students. Five of those paths are highlighted below.

1. **Non-degree programs for students with intellectual disabilities.** Students who want to experience college life but are unable to meet the academic demands can still reside on campus and develop their social, career and independent living skills. In some cases, funds from state agencies (e.g., departments of vocational rehabilitation or developmental disabilities) are available to pay for these programs.
2. **College readiness programs.** Such programs may take the form of a summer program during or after high school, or a year-long gap year program prior to college. These programs also address concerns such as social skills, career goals and independent living. Often there are opportunities for students to do internships or attend nearby colleges on a part-time basis.
3. **Academic support programs.** Students whose primary challenge is in the area of executive functioning (e.g., planning, organization and time management) can benefit greatly from regular appointments with academic coaches who will help them stay on track. However, these programs often lack a social skills component.
4. **College autism support programs.** A growing number of colleges have created dedicated, comprehensive programs to address the needs of students with autism. Many of these programs provide peer mentors, professional academic coaches, social skills groups and career workshops. In some cases, there is no additional fee for these services; in other cases, the added costs can run as much as \$10,000 to \$15,000 per year. Initial results from these programs are very promising.³ However, long-term studies on their effectiveness are limited.⁴
5. **Colleges for students with learning differences.** These colleges are exclusively dedicated to serving the needs of neurodivergent students, such as those with ADHD or autism. At present, the United States only has two such colleges. They feature the advantages of highly trained faculty/staff and a welcoming, inclusive culture. On the other hand, they are small colleges that offer relatively few majors, sports and clubs.

Which path is right for your child? If your child is not capable of college-level work, then the first option listed — a non-degree certificate program — may be the best fit. For other students, it depends on which skills they need to improve in order to be fully college-ready.

Teens with autism can thrive in college whether they master the necessary skills in high school, while in college or during a gap year. The team of professionals working with the student in high school should determine which additional readiness skills the student needs to acquire, then formulate a plan 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.

To find colleges with autism support programs, go to topcollegeconsultants.com.

References

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