

CONFIDENT AND EMPOWERED

By Eric Endlich

The rate of autism in the United States has grown considerably in recent decades. Here's what counselors and colleges need to know as they work with this population of students.





While many autistic young adults are capable of college-level academic work, their path to higher education is often fraught with challenges.

One in 36 children in the United States is autistic.

That's according to data released in 2023 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Previously, the rate of autism was one in 44.

Around the country, more autistic students are starting neurodiversity clubs, proposing disability cultural centers, and narrating their journeys in their college admission essays. With more than 115 autism support programs around the country, according to The College Autism Network, neurodiversity inclusion is of growing importance and relevance.

While many autistic young adults are capable of college-level academic work, their path to higher education is often fraught with challenges. With the proper understanding and guidance, however, they can be highly successful. To properly support them, it's helpful to examine their journey from preparing for college to transitioning to the college experience.

PREPARING FOR COLLEGE

For most students, high school is a time when they begin learning how to be independent, make their own decisions, manage a budget, and practice many other important life skills. For autistic students, though, as well as their families and the professionals who help support them through their

education, this period is even more critical.

"Families must be educated on what it means to be college-ready and should educate themselves on the changes in (their) role, advocacy, independence, expectations, supports, and engagement in preparation throughout the student's junior and senior years of high school," said Nina Schiarizzi-Tobin, M.Ed., assistant director of the Disability, Access, and Inclusion office at the University of Rhode Island (URI) and a neurodivergent woman.

For instance, autistic students' families and support systems should help prepare them to live independently. College will likely be the first time they have been away from home for an extended period.

"They might not know how to set an alarm, show up to class on time, maintain good hygiene, manage their time, advocate for themselves, make their own decisions, manage a budget, set boundaries, or make friends without assistance. These soft skills are not taught in high school and are essential for independent living," said Ben VanHook, an autistic adult and community support coordinator at the Organization for Autism Research (OAR).

Parents should work on gradually lessening direct involvement in their children's lives and provide them



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Brett Ranon Nachman

Director of Research
College Autism Network



with the tools they need to handle more tasks on their own. High school counselors can play an important role in this, too, by providing actionable steps and opportunities for autistic students to elevate their self-advocacy and independence, said Brett Ranon Nachman, an autistic adult who serves as an assistant professor at the University of Arkansas and director of research at the College Autism Network.

Counselors also play a critical role in helping autistic students translate their grades and skills into viable postsecondary options.

“People tend to focus so much on the academics of college that they often forget other skills that are needed,” said Jay Eveson-Egler, autistic adult and senior manager at the Association for Autism and Neurodiversity (AANE). “Building resilience in the face of adversity is an important skill.”

URI’s Schiarizzi-Tobin adds that it is also imperative that counselors help these students consider the accommodations or supports that they use in high school, whether they can be reasonably replicated in higher education, and whether they are helping to prepare the student for success in college.

Even highly accomplished autistic students may struggle in some areas and benefit from counselor support. Shea Belsky, an autistic individual and

chief technology officer of Mentra, a neurodiversity hiring platform, recalls one of the biggest problems during high school was a constant sense of “What am I missing? What am I not getting or understanding? What should I be doing?”

Counselors can be great advocates to their students by helping them approach these difficult topics and fill in the blanks.

THE COLLEGE SEARCH

Along with a campus culture that supports disabilities in general, a right-fit college for autistic students often is one where neurodivergence is active, visible, and a welcomed component of the school’s identity, said Schiarizzi-Tobin.

She noted that it’s important to “guide students to institutions of higher education that prioritize a culture of inclusion; provide student-centered and informed programming or supports; and boast a robust, well-staffed disability department. DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility) efforts must be palpable.”

Increasingly, programs are appearing around the country that serve autistic students in their academic, career, and identity development, as well as in navigating life. These programs can include autism-friendly housing and social events, and sum-

mer bridge programs to boost college readiness.

At Arizona State University, for example, the GATE program — which stands for growth, achievement, transformation, and enrichment — connects autistic students with critical support, including tutoring, assistance with employment and internship opportunities, workshops on self-advocacy and social development, and professional services.

Students, parents, and counselors can find more information about GATE — and other programs and services offered at more than 200 neurodiversity-friendly colleges and universities — at the [Top College Consultants online database](#).

The type and amount of support available to autistic students varies widely, and students ultimately should consider what resources they would most benefit from while searching for the right college. Typ-

AUTHOR’S NOTE

This article uses identity-first language — such as “autistic person” — as surveys show that most adults on the spectrum prefer this terminology over person-first references such as “person with autism,” according to a 2020 survey from the Organization for Autism Research.



ically, institutions offer one of three levels of support:

1. Disability accommodations, including extra time on tests, lecture notes, and sometimes, single rooms in residence halls.
2. One or two additional services, such as academic coaching or meetings with a learning specialist. Such services are available at many colleges and sometimes entail a fee.
3. A comprehensive, multi-pronged autism support program, such as GATE, that features multiple components and frequently requires a substantial fee.

“Ultimately, autistic students should prioritize what matters most to them, which may mean a welcoming campus culture, supportive advising and faculty, classes appealing to their interests, and resources that sustain their success,” said Nachman.

COLLEGE APPLICATIONS

In August 2023, [NACAC released data](#) gathered in collaboration with The Harris Poll that analyzed opinions and insights from more than 1,000 young adults on their experiences applying to college. The poll found that applying to college was the most stressful academic experience for high school students, and that is no exception for those on the autism spectrum.

“We often fear transitions, and this anxiety often manifests as avoidance and/or opposition. It feels easier to refuse college or even just college research and prepare than to confront the change,” said Jonah Fishel, an autistic adult and owner-operator of the Next Step Prep tutoring company for neurodivergent students.

Fishel added that a way to help ease this anxiety is to consider, if

applicable, autistic students’ passions and special interests and how those fuel and fascinate them. Many autistic students have narrow or extreme interests in specific topics.

“If you can find a way to hook parts of the college admission process into those special interests, it will supercharge the whole thing,” said Fishel.

An often-tricky decision for autistic students is whether to disclose their diagnosis during the application process. For Eveson-Egler, disclosing was helpful in determining the right college.

“If they judged based on my diagnosis, I knew they weren’t going to be very accommodating and I would find it challenging to self-advocate or really to even be appreciated by the college for the things I brought to the table,” Eveson-Egler said.

VanHook from OAR also noted that disclosing can be helpful in writing a personal essay. A college applicant, for instance, may want college officials to know that their autism inspired their decision to go into political science and that they want to create a better society for other individuals with disabilities.

Disclosing upfront also can help prepare students for additional disclosures throughout their college journey. If their instructors and professors don’t understand neurodiversity or are not accommodating, students need to be comfortable speaking with their college’s disability services department to get help advocating for their needs.

While disclosure is a personal decision, neurodivergent students often choose to write about it in their essays because they see it as a core aspect of their identity.

“We have a lot of value to bring to organizations, including new ways of thinking and problem-solving,” said

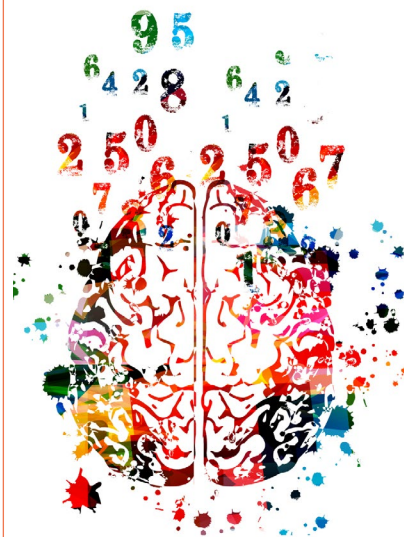
BY THE NUMBERS

1 IN 36
The rate of autistic children in the U.S.

4 IN 100
Rate of autistic boys in the U.S.

1 IN 100
Rate of autistic girls in the U.S.

18 TO 24 MONTHS
Age children should be screened for autism



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023)



Eveson-Egler. “We are oftentimes community-builders, high achievers, and excellent organizers. Judging us on perceived deficits or a cost-benefit analysis of supporting us on your campuses can cause colleges to miss out on what we have to offer.”

TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

Like any forthcoming change, planning is key.

“The supports they have received in high school have, in many cases, made success possible, but these same supports may not exist in college. It’s therefore imperative that there be a transition plan in place at the start of their senior year,” said Lee Williams, executive director of the College Autism Network (CAN).

Preparation should revolve around common concerns, including keeping



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College Autism Network (CAN)

up with the college workload, making new friends, asking for help when needed, time management skills, and maintaining good mental health.

One way to prepare is to ensure autistic students know about the wide range of services available to them at their institution of choice. Ensuring that they know what help is available, and where to find it, can be key to their success.

It can be as simple as connecting autistic students with the right social groups.

“I benefited greatly from being able to network and socialize with other disabled, neurodivergent students. Being able to meet other folks who were going through similar or even different things to me did wonders for my confidence and ability to socialize. When my college held structured social events for us to all hang out, it felt like a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders,” said Belsky.

Students, families, and counselors also can research opportunities for students to dive deeper into their studies — something that can boost their confidence.

With a standard criterion of autism being narrow or extreme interest in specific topics, such intense special interests can work to a student’s advantage when they have the

opportunity to dive deeply into a subject in college, graduate school, or a subsequent career.

“The most successful autistic college students are those who possess the appropriate supports to thrive, and this includes a mix of reliable and helpful individuals in their lives (faculty, relatives, friends) and finding spaces where their skills and passions can be leveraged,” said Nachman.

“Often, once students find majors that relate to their interests, and they can demonstrate that expertise and employment of skills, they may find viable academic and career pathways.”

Ultimately, the transition to college for autistic students can be challenging, but with the right support system in place, a postsecondary education is within reach.

“Being a solid self-advocate, knowing how to set boundaries, and finding your people are all guaranteed ways to feel empowered and confident in college,” said Schiarizzi-Tobin. “It may take time to adjust, but if you work at it, you will be successful.”

Eric Endlich, Ph.D., is a psychologist and founder of Top College Consultants (CA).



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Jay Eveson-Egler
Manager
Association for Autism and Neurodiversity (AANE)