

# Postsecondary Educational Opportunities

There are many opportunities for education when your child leaves the school system or graduates from high school, including traditional two- and four-year colleges. Each model offers different levels of supports and types of services. In addition, in some models, students are integrated with students without disabilities, and others are kept separate. Some allow students to receive individualized services based on his or her vision and career goals.

## Types of Postsecondary Education

Below is a list of some options for postsecondary education programs for individuals with autism.

### *Four-Year College*

More and more four-year colleges and universities are providing support services for students with disabilities, including autism. However, you are encouraged to research these options and make sure that the supports offered meet the needs of your child. Self-advocacy skills are very important in postsecondary education because your child must know how to ask for necessary services and accommodations, such as housing supports, extended time on exams and access to assistive technology. Most schools have counselors and tutors available to help with this process. A good place to start is the school's office of disability services. It is important to note that some schools have autism-specific programs and others are more general for all students with some type of disability.

### *Cooperative Education*

One option at some colleges and universities is cooperative education. In this type of program, your child would alternate between taking academic classes and working in the field of his or her choice. This can oftentimes be a good choice for students with autism, as it allows them to develop both academic and work skills at the same time. It also allows students to explore the fields that interest them and work on the soft skills they will need in the workplace after school ends. Be sure to reach out to colleges and universities or check their websites to see if this type of program is available.

### *Community College*

Many community colleges have developed or are currently developing programs to meet the needs of young adults with developmental disabilities. Community colleges put more of an emphasis on the needs and goals of each student. For some students, the services provided can include necessary life skills like money management and problem solving. Others may focus on more traditional academic subjects and some may have a combination of both. A 2013 study, funded in part by Autism Speaks, found that community colleges may play a particularly important role in fostering transition into productive lives for individuals with autism. The study also found that graduation rates are higher when college students with autism start in a community college, especially those focused on technology, engineering or math.

### *Vocational/Technical/Trade Schools*

Vocational or technical schools can provide your child with the opportunity to experience hands-on learning in a variety of fields. There are some programs that provide this training along with academic skills such as reading, writing and math. These programs also provide vocational experience such as internships and mentorships.

It has been reported that participating in vocational or technical classes during the last two years of high school, especially classes that offer occupational-specific instruction, is a successful transition strategy. It may be helpful to work with your school district to find out about programs in your area.

### ***Life Skills Programs***

There are many life skills programs available for people with autism that offer services to help your child live as independently as possible. These programs cover a wide array of skills – from basic skills like money management, shopping and transportation, to employment training skills in work settings. The programs also teach social skills and provide services such as recreational and leisure activities that will help integrate your child into his or her community, an important part of adult life.

## 504 Plans

Once you choose the right program, it is important to become familiar with the school's disability-related resources so that your young adult can be sure to advocate for the services and supports to which he or she is entitled.

IDEA requirements no longer apply when your child has left high school and is enrolled in an institution of higher education. However, Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are civil rights laws that help protect individuals with disabilities including autism from discrimination in school, work and public accommodations. Section 504 applies to any school that gets federal funding. Students with disabilities cannot be denied appropriate services or supports that may be necessary to meet their needs, or that would be available to students without disabilities.



In order to be eligible for Section 504 protections, your child has to have a physical or mental impairment that *substantially limits* one or more major life activity, as well as a history of this impairment in a major life area. Reasonable accommodations can include audio books, readers or note-takers, access to the instructor's notes, extended time for assignments and tests, preferential seating and other similar supports.

Keep in mind that Section 504 does NOT require an institution to compose a written plan, but most places will do this. In order for your child to receive accommodations, he or she or an advocate must request them. Remember that the level of supports, as well as their efficiency and effectiveness, varies from school to school, so be sure to do as much research as possible.

Learn more about Section 504, IDEA and the general responsibilities of a public school from the National Association of School Psychologists by [clicking here](#) or using the link in the resources section of this kit.

## Differences between High School and College

The following chart, adapted from Kay McVey, Faculty Development Specialist, PROJECT Connect, at Henderson State University, provides a clear illustration of the differences between high school and college:

<b>HIGH SCHOOL</b>	<b>COLLEGE</b>
All students have the right to an education.	College education is a privilege, not a right.
Protections include Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Americans with Disabilities Act.	Protections include Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Americans with Disabilities Act; IDEA no longer applies.
School district designs Individualized Education Program (IEP).	Student is responsible for providing documentation that establishes verification of learning or other type of disability.
School district ensures that the IEP is implemented.	Student identifies his or her needs in collaboration with his or her counselor.
Teacher functions as advocate.	Student is responsible for his or her own progress.
Fundamental alterations to program of study are made.	Fundamental alterations of programs are not allowed - classroom accommodations may not alter the fundamental nature of a course or impose an undue burden on an instruction/institution.
Personal services are provided (e.g., aide) - success is more of a right.	Personal services are the student's responsibility - only the opportunity to succeed is provided.
Transportation to and from school is provided.	Transportation to and from school is NOT provided.
Parent or guardian is the primary advocate - students learn ways to become their own advocate.	Students are expected to be their own advocates to the best of their ability.

**When preparing your child for college, below are some important points for you to remember:**

In order to apply for or attend college, your child will need to obtain a high school diploma or a General Education Diploma (GED). An IEP diploma will not be recognized by institutions of higher education.

Make sure that all standardized tests have been taken. Some colleges will require these for admission. If you think your child may need extra support taking these tests, oftentimes accommodations can be arranged.

Find out if colleges that your child may be interested in require IQ or achievement test scores to receive accommodations under Section 504.

Assess if your child needs any remedial classes before going on to college. Some students do this at college, others spend an extra year in high school. Summer courses may be an option at a college in your area.

Work closely with your child's guidance counselor to begin to explore available options. One option is dual enrollment, when a student who is still officially in high school is also taking one or more classes at a college for credit. This allows your child to begin to get used to the college setting, life and workload while still in high school.

Discuss your child's postsecondary options with your local Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS). They may have funding available to help defray costs.

## Choosing the Right School

Choosing the right school is important for any student's happiness and success, but often especially for students with autism. There are many factors to consider and questions to ask when exploring post-secondary education options. *The Autism Transition Guide: Planning the Journey from School to Adult Life* by Carolyn Bruey and Mary Beth Urban offers the following advice:

- Talk to the guidance counselor at your school.
- Attend local college fairs and ask about disability support services.
- Ask your child's teachers where some of their past students have attended college.
- Ask other parents of students with ASD.
- Consult local autism organizations to see listings of colleges that offer supports.
- Make sure to arrange visits to any potential schools where you can speak to staff and students. The school may also be able to connect you to other students with ASD and their families.
- Investigate if the school has the proper supports and services available for your child to have the most successful and rewarding experience possible.
- Keep in mind that there are many different types of institutions that your child could possibly attend. These include vocational school, community college, technical institutes, state schools, liberal art schools and also the variation of two-year versus four-year programs.
- Factors that come into play when selecting a college can also include location and finances.
- Students and their parents should not hesitate to visit the selected college and the one they will eventually attend as many times as they need to in order to familiarize themselves with the college.



## Self-Advocacy in Postsecondary Education

Postsecondary education is one of the best opportunities for your child to advocate for him or herself. College counselors are more readily willing to listen when the student, not the parent, approaches them. You may want to remind your young adult that his or her “voice” will make a difference. You may also want to help him or her make a list of his or her most significant concerns about colleges or other postsecondary programs. Young adults should be encouraged to share these concerns with their advisors. Creating a solid support system may lower the chances of future problems.

Because the mandatory supports available in high school are no longer available, it is far more important to advocate for services and supports in postsecondary education. Rather than receiving them automatically, it is now up to your child to ask for what he or she needs in all situations, both academic and social. Aside from the necessary services, there will be other areas in which your child needs to communicate and advocate for him or herself – including knowing when and how to disclose his or her autism diagnosis, understanding his or her rights and asking for assistance when necessary.

Once again, it is never too early to start teaching self-advocacy skills. The more prepared your child is to advocate for him or herself in postsecondary programs, the more supports he or she will receive and the more successful and effective the program will be as a result.

### *Expert Advice for Parents*

Barbara Kite, M.Ed., Assistant Director of the PACE program at National Louis University, offered Autism Speaks six tips to share with parents regarding preparing for postsecondary education:



- 1. Plan Ahead** – It is never too early to learn about the different kinds of programming available for your child.
- 2. Know Your Goals** – What is it you want for your child? Independence? A four-year degree? A job?
- 3. Go and Look** – Be sure to visit the programs that you are interested in. There is a good chance that what you THINK the program is in actuality may be quite different.
- 4. Ask Questions!** – Not all programs are what they appear to be.
- 5. Think About Cost** – Unless you are going to use government programs, the price of postsecondary programs can be high. You may have to be creative when it comes to financing your child’s postsecondary experience.
- 6. Make A List** – Think about what environment you want your child in. Do you see him or her at a community college? Or going away from home? Does he or she need a program that offers academic support? Consider whatever YOU learned by osmosis is what you need someone to teach to your child.

## *Autism Speaks Postsecondary Educational Opportunities Guide*

In 2013, Autism Speaks released the Postsecondary Educational Opportunities Guide, a tool written for young adults with autism to help them and their families explore the different opportunities and learning environments after leaving high school. Sections include: Preparing for Postsecondary Education, Obtaining Services and Asking for Accommodations, Peer-to-Peer Advice, Life on Campus and more.

Download this tool kit at

[autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits/postsecondary](http://autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits/postsecondary).

## Conclusion

When your child graduates from high school or ages out of the special education system, it is important to continue to educate him or her, whether it's at a college, a local day therapy program, in your home, or anywhere in between. The more your child continues to learn, the more opportunities that will become available to him or her at work, out in the community or in other local programs. Be sure to research and explore the postsecondary education options available to your child from an early age so you can decide together what might be the best fit.

