

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Transitioning to College

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that, as of 2019, one in 59 children (mostly boys) were diagnosed with ASD

Young people on the autism spectrum are much less likely to go to college or find a substantial job after high school compared to their peers with other disabilities. One study posits that only about 36% of children on the autism spectrum pursue some type of postsecondary education, while 66% of all other high school graduates tend to pursue postsecondary education (Alsehem et al., 2017).

While certainly not the only factor, deficiencies related to transition programs are part of the problem. Transitioning to higher education is a challenge for many students and can be especially difficult for students with disabilities. Transition problems are exacerbated when students are having difficulty with organization, time management, communication, and social skills (College Autism Network, 2018).

Transition programs at too many high schools and colleges are not providing the type of supports for choosing to go to college, for selecting one that will be a good fit, and for the transition to and in the first months at college. Those who make it into college can feel overwhelmed as they try to cope with the new environment (e.g., new people, new structures, new expectations, new routines, the absence of a parental caregiver and other previous supports.) At the latest, supports for transitioning to college should begin early in high school, with an emphasis on enhancing the student's capabilities and intrinsic motivation for succeeding at college.

About College Programs

With the increase in the number diagnosed as having autism, public awareness and support there has increased. In 2002, Marshall University developed the first autism support program. By 2019, 60 more colleges and postsecondary institutions have added autism outreach and assistance programs. As of today, there is at least one college in each state that offers a support program specifically designed for autism (West, 2019). However, demand tends to outpace supply and the autism support programs still serve relatively few students.

The types of support offered vary from college to college. Three different models have been identified:

- *mixed/hybrid model* – “students on the autism spectrum take academic classes with students without disabilities, but they also participate in classes with other students with disabilities such life skills or transition classes”
- *separate model* – “students with disabilities take classes only with other students with disabilities”
- *inclusive individual support model* – “students receive individualized support services based on their vision and goals. Adult service agencies, community services and the school's disability support office work together to come up with a range of customized services” (ACO, 2020).

Besides these, colleges also provide personal accommodations for all students with disabilities (e.g., longer times for taking exams, extended deadlines for projects and assignments, assistance with notetaking, lighter amounts of classwork, use of technology in the classroom).

*The material in this document reflects work done by Keith Koziol as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> Send comments to ltaylor@ucla.edu

An Example of One University's Efforts to Provide a Multifaceted and Comprehensive Program

The Mosaic Program at the University of Tennessee Chattanooga was developed in 2008 “to support the holistic needs of degree-seeking students on the Autism Spectrum. The Mosaic program is made up of four primary components. Each of these works in concert with the other to provide a comprehensive program. These components include (1) A credit bearing course with a fully established curriculum with a letter grade attached, (2) Coaching, (3) Peer/Professional Mentoring, and (4) Supervised Study Hours.”

The process provides students with ASD opportunities to share their personal experiences, build social rapport with other students, and enhance social and career building skills.

From an article by West (2019):

“Mosaic enrolls about 10 new students every year and offers services that include coaching and supervised study hours. Participants also take four year long academic courses helping them develop social skills, starting with transitioning into college and becoming independent and culminating in developing professional skills and gaining work experience through internships and job shadowing.

Resident assistants in the dorms get special training, and Mosaic staff will sit in on meetings between Mosaic students and their roommates when necessary. UTC has added sensory rooms across campus, which provide quiet spaces to decompress. The rooms are equipped with weighted blankets, textured pillows and moldable Kinetic Sand, which can be soothing when students are experiencing sensory overload.

The university also pairs Mosaic students with other UTC undergraduates who take a class about autism and advocacy. These mentors meet with their students at least an hour a week and sometimes organize group activities, such as a seminar on relationships.

“We will help them understand what a neurotypical will seek out in romantic relationships and friendships,” said senior Hayleigh Weissenbach. ...

Mosaic, and other programs such as the College Supports Program at Eastern Michigan University, also come with hefty price tags, in addition to tuition and housing. That makes it less likely for low-income students with autism to enroll. Studies show that the percentage of young adults with autism who attend college increases as household income increases.

UTC's Mosaic program charges \$3,500 per semester, while Eastern Michigan charges between \$5,500 and \$7,000, depending on the level of support. Eastern Michigan develops an individual support plan for each of the 34 students enrolled in its program.

At UTC, students who are Tennessee residents can get help paying for Mosaic fees through the state's vocational rehabilitation program, which offers services to people with disabilities. But families that don't have similar programs in their own states have to pay out-of-state tuition in addition to the program fees.”

Concluding Comments

The increasing number of students with disabilities entering institutes of higher education calls for improving transition supports. Those providing guidance to such students need to know about special programs and rights to accommodations that are available in order to create a good transition plan. In addition to formal plans, research indicates that students with ASD report a need for increased autism awareness on campus, sensory friendly areas with little distraction, educational practices designed for multiple learning preferences disability support groups, and more acceptance of self-stimulating behavior.

Resources Used in the Preparation of this Work

- Affordable Colleges Online Organization (2021). *Going to college with Asperger's and Autism*. Online at <https://www.affordablecollegesonline.org/college-resource-center/students-with-autism/>
- Alsehem, M., Abousaadah, M., Sairafi, R., Jan, M. (2017). Public awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorder. *NeuroSciences*, 22, 213-215. doi: 10.17712/nsj.2017.3.20160525
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2019). *Autism Spectrum Disorder: Signs and symptoms*. National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, CDC. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/signs.html>
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2020). *Diagnostic criteria for 299.00 Autism Spectrum Disorder*. American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/hcp-dsm.html>
- Chamberlain, B., Kasari, C., Rotheram-Fuller, E. (2007). Involvement or isolation? The social networks of children with autism in regular classrooms. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 37, 230-242. doi: 10.1007/s10803-006-0164-4
- College Autism Network (2018). Accommodations and support in higher education: Insights from the autism community. *College Autism Network: Fast Facts*, 7, 1. <https://collegeautismnetwork.org/fastfact7/>
- Faras, H., Ateeqi, N. A., Tidmarsh, L. (2010). Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Annals of Saudi Medicine*, 30, 295-300. doi: 10.4103/0256-4947.65261
- Huerta, M., Lord, C. (2013). Diagnostic evaluation of Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, 59, 103-111. doi: 10.1016/j.pcl.2011.10.018
- Hodges, H., Fealko, C., Soares, N. (2020). Autism Spectrum disorder: Definition, epidemiology, causes, and clinical evaluation. *Translational Pediatrics*, 9, 55-65. doi: 10.21037/tp.2019.09.09
- Jeste, S. (2012). The Neurology of Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Current Opinion in Neurology*, 24, 132-139. doi: 10.1097/WCO.0b013e3283446450
- Marotta, R., Risoleo, M., Messina, G., Parisi, L., Vetri, L., Rocella, M. (2020). The Neurochemistry of Autism. *Brain Sciences*, 10 (3), 163. doi: 10.3390/brainsci10030163
- Sarrett, J. C. (2018). Autism and accommodations in higher education: Insights from the autism community. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48, 679-692. doi: 10.1007/s10803-017-3353-4
- West, C. (2019). As diagnoses rise, more colleges add services for students with autism. *The Hechinger Report*, 50, 1. <https://www.disabilitycoop.com/2020/02/28/as-diagnoses-rise-colleges-add-autism/27896/>
- For more on supports for transition, see the links on following Quick Finds from our Center:

>Transition to College – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/transitiontocollege.htm>

>Transition Programs/Grade Articulation/Welcoming – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101_01.htm