



## EDUCATION AFTER HIGH SCHOOL: WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS?

More and more students on the autism spectrum are deciding to pursue education beyond high school. One reason for this is the recognition by post-secondary institutions that autistic students can be not only qualified, but also successful students, particularly when given needed supports. As a result, there are more and more post-secondary programs to choose from.

Most people think of traditional college when they think of post-secondary education, but there are other options, ranging from pre-college programs to vocational training to personal development classes offered in the community. The paragraphs below outline some of the most popular programs. Accommodations (known as “academic adjustments”), which may be required under Titles II and III of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) or Subpart E of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), as well as any additional supports that may be available to college students, are discussed in separate articles.

### *Pre-College Programs:*

With more and more students with disabilities wanting to go to college, a number of programs designed to prepare students for the experience have been developed. Sometimes these programs are available to students while they are attending high school; others are specifically designed for students who are high school graduates.

These programs vary in how they accomplish the objective of preparing students for higher education. Some are residential and help teach students about living in a dorm – from getting along with roommates (and how to resolve the inevitable conflict), to self-care (using community bathrooms, for example), to getting up on time for class. Others focus on building self-advocacy skills, including communicating with teachers about the need for accommodations, standing up for oneself in a social context, and self-regulation. Executive functioning and

organizational skills may be stressed, particularly how to remain focused in a class when assignments may be long-term or there are less frequent tests to gauge whether or not the student understands the material. Academics may even be a part of the program. Programming may be provided by college professors, psychologists, peers, or other educational and medical professionals.

Available programs are included in the Resource Directory of the CAR Autism Roadmap™, under the category of Education - College Autism Support. When contacting a program, pay attention to the specific services offered, who delivers instruction, the location of the program, and particularly the program cost, as some can be quite expensive.

### *Traditional Four-year Colleges or Universities:*

Typically students attend a traditional four-year college or university to receive a bachelor's degree. A bachelor's degree is a degree conferred on a student which indicates that he or she has successfully completed the coursework related to a particular field of study as required by the college or university. The requirements for receiving the degree may vary at each institution, as will the degrees conferred. Many colleges and universities offer a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree as well as a Bachelor of Science (BS) degree. Within these two programs, a student may have a particular major of study, such as English or Political Science (typically earning a BA) or Mechanical Engineering or Chemistry (typically earning a BS). A given college or university may have dozens if not close to a hundred different majors to choose from.

Historically, the difference between a "college" and a "university" was whether the school conferred degrees in more than one area. A "university" is made up of multiple colleges within the university, such as the Business College, College of Arts and Sciences, or the Engineering College. In the United States, the terms "college" and "university" are often used interchangeably. Probably the biggest difference between a school designated as a "college" and one which is a "university" is the size of the institution. Typically, universities are much larger than colleges; however there are many different sized universities, ranging from a few thousand students to more than 10,000 students.

Students pursuing a bachelor's degree may have the option of living on the college campus; some schools may even require this for the first year or two. Other

schools allow students to commute from home when possible or to live in nearby off-campus housing. Housing can be a major concern related to the college experience for many autistic students due to social difficulties, developing life skills, or academic concerns.

Because of this, some colleges and universities are offering residential support programs to students with disabilities or accommodations outside of what the ADA and Section 504 require. For example, students may be allowed to commute to school from home, rather than live in a dorm; may be granted a private room, instead of sharing a dorm room with 1 or more fellow students; or may be given preferred housing, such as a dorm closer to academic buildings, suite-style living, or a room situated near a faculty or resident advisor (who may even be given some training related to ASD).

Other supports which may be found at some colleges and universities include specific programs to help autistic students acclimate to the college experience. These include mentoring programs, social groups (which may include peers as social coaches), special academic advisors, psychological services specific to ASD, and tutoring. More information on these special programs is contained in a separate article within the CAR Autism Roadmap™.

Some colleges and universities allow students to attend classes without being in a degree program. This means that a student can take classes without the intent of graduating from the institution. Often students will audit a class (take the class without the intention of receiving a “grade” in the class, other than Pass or Fail) or take a class or series of classes for the purpose of transferring the credits to another institution or for the ability to include the training on a resume or job application. While the academic adaptations required by the ADA and Section 504 must be provided, usually students do not qualify for the optional support programs that a given college may offer if they are not enrolled in a degree program.

In general, to enroll in a class offered by a college or university, a student must have graduated from high school. (One exception is high school students who are dually enrolled in high school and a college class.) To enroll, most colleges have prerequisites, such as standardized testing (commonly the SAT or the ACT), teacher recommendations, and/or student essays. You will need to research to find out what the colleges you are interested in require. CollegeBoard.com is a good

resource for gaining summary information, and individual college websites can provide more specifics. You will want to search for “disability services” on a particular college’s website to learn about its specific support programs.

### *Community Colleges:*

Community colleges, also sometimes called “technical colleges” or “junior colleges,” offer “associate degrees” or certificates, as compared to “bachelor’s degrees,” which are conferred by four-year colleges. It usually takes two years to complete community college requirements, although it can take longer if a student is not taking a full load of classes, or less time if the student takes extra classes or courses during the summer months. (A full load is typically about four or five classes a semester, for two semesters a year.)

Sometimes the credits acquired in a community college may be transferred to a traditional college (when courses meet the traditional college’s standards). Many community colleges have agreements in place with four-year institutions that have pre-determined what classes will be accepted for credit into the four-year institution if a certain grade-level is achieved. Some have even developed programs in partnership with four-year colleges, which enable a student to graduate from the four-year institution after completing two years in community college and two at the traditional college or university.

Not all students who attend community college do so with the intent of going to a four-year college or university, however. Many students attend community college expecting to transition directly to employment. Many associate degrees and certificate programs offered by community colleges are designed with this in mind.

Additionally, just like in a four-year college, some students simply take classes at a community college without the intention of receiving a degree or a certificate. They may do this for personal development or interest or to get specific training in an area needed by an employer or potential employer.

Areas of study within community college can be quite diverse – often more so than a traditional college. Examples of community college degree programs and/or certificate programs include programs as varied as accounting, health services, interior design, computer technology, graphic design, music and theater, automotive service, culinary arts, and dental hygiene.

To enroll in a degree program within a community college, you must have graduated from high school (or have received a GED). Some community colleges may waive this requirement for students who wish to take remedial courses, self-help classes, or courses designed to learn a specific skill (like engine repair or typing, for example), particularly if the course being taken is not for credit. In general, community colleges usually have less stringent enrollment criteria than four-year colleges. For example, few require standardized testing for admission, although you may need to take a placement test before enrolling in some classes. Admissions criteria vary from school to school, so it is a good idea to check with a specific school to learn what it requires.

One potential benefit to community college is that, in general, students do not live in student housing provided by the school. This removes one of the challenges of a traditional college. Some students on the autism spectrum find it helpful to take courses at the community college level before applying to a four-year college or university. This allows them to get acclimated to participating in a college environment on a smaller scale (community colleges are generally much smaller than a typical four-year college) and with less complications (college roommates, dorm life, etc.). Though community college students do not live in college housing, there are ample opportunities for students to engage in social activities with one another. There are student organizations, such as student government and special interest groups, which can provide a structured social experience for students who seek out these opportunities.

Support programs outside of those required by the ADA or Section 504 may be harder to find in community colleges. Check with the department in charge of disability services to find out what is currently available and what the school may be willing to consider.

### *Vocational Schools:*

Vocational schools, also known as trade schools, teach students job specific skills. Some vocational programs also provide instruction on core academic skills, such as math and writing, particularly when these skills are relevant to the job the student is preparing for.

Many existing trade schools are government-run or supported, such as those related to a state's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. Other trade schools are becoming less prevalent as community colleges are developing similar programs

and certificate programs.

Most trade schools do not require a high school diploma or GED. Additionally, high school students are often dually enrolled in high school and a vocational program as part of each student's transition plan. When a vocational school is part of a high school student's transition plan, the accommodations available to that student through his or her Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan will apply. Students who are no longer enrolled in high school will receive the accommodations allowed by Subpart E of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Titles II and III of the ADA. Additional support programs are less likely to be available in vocational schools.

#### *Other Community Programs:*

Besides the programs discussed above, there is a wide array of options for education in the community. Most of these do not yield a certificate signifying mastery (though some do), but they can provide a means for both furthering learning in a specific area of interest as well as provide an opportunity for social interaction with individuals with similar interests. These programs can be found at your local YMCA, library, parks and recreation department, hospital, state department of education (search for "adult education"), health and wellness centers, and even local business establishments like Viking (cooking classes), Home Depot (carpentry, tiling, etc.), and Michaels (flower arranging, knitting, and other arts and crafts classes).

Because these programs are often small, it is a good idea to contact someone who is familiar with the class you are interested in and ask for any specific accommodations that may help you succeed. If the person with whom you are speaking is unfamiliar with the need to make the program accessible to individuals with disabilities, ask to speak to the person in charge of ADA compliance.

#### *Online Education:*

Many of the programs discussed above also have online versions. This may be a good option for someone who wants to build skill and expertise before entering a program offered in-person or for someone who is hesitant to enroll in an in-person program at all. However, because an online program by its nature does not have a face-to-face social component, it is limited in its ability to prepare someone for interactions in the community.

One reason many individuals on the autism spectrum choose to pursue higher education is for the social connection provided. If this is not your purpose for pursuing post-secondary education, online education may be worth considering. Increasingly, job opportunities are available to those willing to work remotely; indeed, some jobs, such as freelance writing, web design, and telemarketing, may have no or minimal requirements for face-to-face meetings. These do require other interpersonal skills, however, such as the ability to effectively communicate by phone, Skype, and/or email.

#### Related Articles:

- [Accommodations in Higher Education](#)
- [College Support Programs: Going Beyond What Is Required](#)
- [Post-Secondary Admissions Assessments](#)
- [Should I Disclose My Diagnosis on My College Application?](#)
- [College or Employment: What's Right for Me?](#)

#### Recommended Link:

- [CAR Resource Directory™ \(search for Education – College Autism Support and/or Vocational Programs – General\)](#)

#### Additional Resources:

- [Post-Secondary Education, from the Autism Transition Handbook](#)
- [What's the Point? A Reflection about the Purpose and Outcomes of College for Students with Intellectual Disabilities](#)
- [Bridging the Gap: Students on Spectrum Autism Find Hope After High School](#)
- [College Programs for Students with Asperger Syndrome](#)
- [Autism Awareness: College Programs for Students on the Spectrum](#)
- [Going to College](#)
- [Students in Transition; Thinking about Life After Graduation](#)
- [Postsecondary Educational Opportunities Guide](#)

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