

Postsecondary Possibilities for Students with Asperger's By David R. Parker, Ph.D.

Over the past decade, a growing number of students with Asperger's have transitioned to college (Morrison, Sansoti, & Hadley, 2009). We know this because students with high functioning autism are requesting campus support services with greater frequency. While each student is a unique individual first and foremost, many undergraduates with Asperger's share a combination of strengths and weaknesses. Strengths can include high intelligence, prolific knowledge about a small number of interests, a shy kindness, computer proficiency, and the ability to spend many hours on activities of personal interest. The website www.CollegeAutismSpectrum.com provides a wealth of information about these students. The experts behind this resource succinctly capture the weaknesses that many college students with Asperger's can experience:

“Students with autism spectrum disorders often have no trouble meeting the entrance criteria to the college of their choice, yet once there, have extreme difficulty navigating the academic and social complexities inherent in the college experience. Many lack the self-management skills needed to independently organize and integrate all aspects of college life. Stress of transition can inhibit a student's ability to know who and when to ask for help.”

Parents of *any* undergraduate often have intense hopes and worries when their offspring go off to college. For parents of students with Asperger's, additional concerns can include their self-care, self-advocacy, realistic decision making, and the student's ability to make friends in a new setting. Given these worries, parents of students on the spectrum often have a particularly hard time “letting go.” A 2009 study, *Parent Perceptions of the Anticipated Needs and Expectations for Support for their College-Bound Students with Asperger's Syndrome*, explored recommendations from parents' perspectives. These included:

- Consider alternate routes to college completion. Many students with Asperger's benefit from starting college at a local community college while living at home and then transferring to a four-year college later.
- Realize that parents may need to stay more involved with college-aged children with Asperger's, particularly to help with daily living skills such as laundry, personal hygiene, money management, and making doctors' appointments.
- Work with a Disability Services staff member on campus who can help students sign up for classes with particularly accommodating professors.
- Work with campus mentors to learn how to navigate social systems on campus and find groups that provide semi-structured social opportunities (e.g., video gaming club).

Read more about these parents' hopes, worries, and suggestions at:

http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=EJ868133&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=EJ868133

Anecdotally, college students with Asperger's tend to have the cognitive ability to succeed in college. Their biggest challenges to success often fall into three other areas. First, social communication can be difficult. Students on the spectrum may find it harder than usual, for example, to interact with roommates and other students in loud, disorganized college dormitories. The need to meet with a professor to discuss questions about class assignments may overwhelm the student with anxiety. Second, self-management can be difficult. Students on the spectrum may forget - or have no interest in - showering regularly or putting

on clean clothes each day. While it may be said that many college undergraduates lapse into these behaviors, students with Asperger's may rigidly cling to such habits. Shutting off the computer and leaving the dorm room may create such anxiety that the student becomes isolated and, over time, depressed. Simply keeping up with assignments can be impaired by poor time management skills. Third, students with Asperger's may lack the study skills needed to maintain academic success. This is particularly likely when they have to study material of low interest, rote review large volumes of factual information (e.g., Spanish vocabulary), or complete assignments whose directions are vague or unclear.

In 2002, John Harpur, Maria Lawlor, and Michael Fitzgerald wrote a paperback entitled, *Succeeding in College with Asperger Syndrome: A Student Guide* (Cambridge University Press). They provide many insights from a first-person perspective, although American readers may not fully relate to this British publication. Still, the book is a helpful tool for high school or college students with Asperger's who want to understand how to succeed in college. Anxiety - especially intense worries about what to expect in new situations - is a hallmark of living with Asperger's. Summer "taste of college" experiences for college-bound students with Asperger's can greatly reduce the fears that students - and their parents - experience. One such program here in Indiana is the College Internship Program in Bloomington. More information can be found at <http://www.cipworldwide.org/summer/>. A growing number of U.S. campuses now offer structured programs for college students with Asperger's. Read more at <http://collegeautismspectrum.com/collegeprograms.html>.

Not every high school graduate is prepared for college. But the door *has* opened wider for qualified students with Asperger's. The key to their success is the ability to self-advocate in college by identifying and using resources in a timely manner. Perhaps the single most important campus resource is a college's Disability Services office. Students (and their parents) are encouraged to make contact with this office early, during the college search process. Working closely with the Disability Services staff before and during college can help students with Asperger's navigate the complex academic and social world of postsecondary education. In addition, students with Asperger's should explore the following services. Many CRG providers can help with these needs. For more information, call CRG's Intake Line at (317) 575-9111, Ext. 214.

- **Medications management.** Work with a psychiatrist/med provider who specializes in youth/adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Where there is no medication per se for Asperger's, physicians can help individuals manage mood, anxiety, depression, and related issues that often co-exist with the disorder.
- **Self-awareness training.** The more a student with Asperger's understands his/her disability, the more he/she can set realistic expectations. Attend a support group or work individually with a psychologist to learn more.
- **Current documentation.** All college students with disabilities need current documentation (i.e., an assessment report) to qualify for accommodations and services. Just as importantly, a current assessment can help students and their parents understand how that student learns and what he/she may need in the way of college-level services.
- **Career assessment.** Many college-bound students with Asperger's have limited work experience. Obtain individualized assistance in exploring realistic majors and career paths by pursuing a career assessment.
- **Strategies instruction.** Work with an academic coach to develop college-level study skills and organizational strategies such as time management.