



ASD and the Transition to College: Introduction



The transition to college is associated with a variety of mixed emotions including excitement and anxiety at the prospect of enjoying increased independence and new freedoms and taking a step into the world of adulthood. For young adults with ASD and their families, the associated demands on flexibility, organization and planning, and social skills and social cognition may feel like a mine field. A 2011 U.S. Department of Education longitudinal study indicated that 47% of young adults with ASD enrolled in post-secondary education programs within 6 years of graduating High School. The completion rate of post-secondary program was 35% of enrolled individuals with ASD, 38% of all individuals with other disabilities, and 51% of general population, reflecting the additional challenges of adults with ASD in achieving their goals.

Two studies (Wolf et al., 2009; Gobbo et al., 2013) identified executive dysfunction as primary challenges to college students with ASD including difficulty:

- Understanding the big picture to complete assignments, including the audience for written work
- Generalizing from specifics
- Planning and organizing time/materials
- Navigating social demands: collaborating with peers, meeting with instructors
- Managing anxiety that quickly escalates

Barriers to Success

Anxiety is often a problem for individuals with ASD, and cognitive and behavioral inflexibility can lead to increased anxiety in response to the many changes associated with college. When a routine changes, there is uncertainty and an associated increase in anxiety over "What will stay the same?" and "How bad will the change be?" Following high school, the entire daily structure may change, from what to wear (no uniforms and little to no dress code), what to eat (no assigned lunch time and options for where and when to eat), and what to do (different class schedule with large breaks of time between classes). Lack of experience may initially limit the student's ability to independently address these questions, leading to mounting anxiety. Young adults with ASD may find it helpful to view the [blog of Lynne Soraya](#), a young adult with ASD, about these stressors and her strategies to address them.

The challenge associated with answering the questions that arise from a change in routine is compounded by organization and planning weaknesses. Students with ASD often benefit from the inherent structure of a high school day and additional supports and accommodations in high school that are not available in college. The increased freedom of post-high school life is associated with increased responsibility and decision making. Identifying specific goals and developing a plan of attack can reduce anxiety and lead to better outcomes.



One important starting point is enhancing independence in daily living skills. If hygiene continues to be a problem, that it an important first step; poor hygiene can be a deal-breaker when it comes to establishing a working relationship and/or friendship with peers, professors, and college staff. Beyond establishing a routine to achieve good hygiene, gaining an accurate understanding of why good hygiene is important is essential. A social skills group is often the best way for a young adult to obtain insight into "the whys" of showering and other personal hygiene elements in a supportive environment. Additional supports will likely be needed to develop and implement a plan.

Beyond hygiene, there are several important tasks to be tackled before the start of college:

- Independence in taking care of belongings (think shopping and laundry!)
- Planning and executing meals for adequate nutrition
- Maintaining a sufficiently orderly living area
- Getting oneself to classes and appointments independently

Establishing goals deemed necessary for a successful transition and specific criteria for achieving the goals can be helpful to the young adult student and parents in recognizing readiness to leave home. The degree to which a young adult demonstrates independence in caring for themselves will help him/her and their families recognize their readiness for moving out of the home to attend college. One source of support is the [Strive program](#) developed by Danya; their *Student Workbook* is available online at no additional cost [here](#).

Programs & Supports

The decision on where to attend is another primary challenge. Programs are increasingly aware of the needs of individuals with ASD and are addressing them to various degrees. Working with a consultant who specializes in college transitions may be helpful in identifying a program that offers appropriate supports to meet the needs of the student and offers programs of study consistent with the college students career goals. Gobbo et al. (2013) identified characteristics of ASD students that college instructors viewed as strengths including:

- Passion about learning and interests can lead to practice with research, reading, writing on the interest
- "Need to be right"- seeks out additional information
- Rule follower- follow lab rules carefully, timely for class...

With additional planning and continued supports, young adults with ASD can negotiate the new challenges of college. A key take home message is that it is never too early to prepare for the transition from high school, regardless of the eventual goal.

A multidisciplinary intervention is best prior to and during college (Hewitt, 2011) to address the primary challenge: *Negotiate the increased expectations for initiative and independence*. Treatment suggestions include:

- Tutoring to teach organization skills
- Speech-Language Pathology (SLP) to address pragmatic and social skill/cognition, ideally in a group
- Psychotherapist to develop coping and social skills
- Parents often continue to play a role in supporting skill development



The Unstuck and On Target (UOT) program has demonstrated efficacy in addressing underlying inflexibility with resulting improvements in flexibility, planning, organization skills and even classroom behaviors in 3rd-5th grade students with ASD (Kenworthy & Anthony et al., 2013). UOT was successful with children and school staff in mainstream educational settings, increasing its potential for widespread use. The CASD research team and collaborators are currently adapting UOT for adolescents, tailoring the intervention to meet the unique needs of teens with ASD. The new intervention builds on the framework of UOT, but will specifically address challenges faced by adolescents with ASD by using innovative vocabulary, activities and motivators that are appropriate for teens.

There are an increasing number of group psychotherapy programs with promising support, including:

- **Problem Solving Therapy (PST)**, which focuses on the individual's problem orientation. Pugliese (who is completing post-doctoral training at Children's National) & White (2013) used PST to address the constructive and destructive impact of emotions in social problem solving, and teach skills for effective decision making and improved self-sufficiency, resulting in improved problem solving for some subjects. More research is needed to explore the utility of this program with college students with ASD.
- **The PEERS program** is a 16-week problem focused treatment program with strong support in the literature. The Center for Autism Assessment and Treatment (CAAT) offers a [PEERS program](#) both for teens (12-18) and young adults (18-30+), with enrollment opening again in Fall, 2014. For more information about the CAAT PEERS program, please contact peers@caatonline.com or call (240) -420-0184.

Resources

One excellent starting point for individuals with ASD and their parents written by young adults with ASD is [Navigating College: A Handbook on Self Advocacy Written for Autistic Adults from Autistic Adults](#), compiled by [The Autism Self Advocacy Network](#) (ASAN).

[The Parent's Guide to College for Students on the Autism Spectrum](#) (Brown et al., 2012) is written for parents as a guide to addressing many of the questions that revolve around college for students with ASD.

[Autism Speaks](#) provides a [Transition Tool Kit](#) with a review of various elements of successful transitioning and basic information on timelines for services specific to each state.

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