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The Transition to College: Success for Students with Autism/Asperger's

By S. Jay Kuder, Ed.D.

Each year, more and more young adults with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) and high functioning autism (HFA) are going to college. And why not? Most of these individuals have the intellectual ability, the grades, and the motivation to attend college. But students with AS/HFA can also face some unique challenges. What can these students and their families do to ease the transition from high school to college and make the college experience more successful?

First, start preparing your child well ahead of time. If your child with special needs has an IEP (Individualized Education Plan), federal law requires that a transition plan be set up as part of the IEP when the child turns 16. Prior to changes in federal law in July 2005, the age for transition planning was 14 and many states still adhere to this age in state education laws. The transition plan addresses the child's goals once high school ends, which may include going to college, attending a trade school, seeking employment, etc. If college is your child's goal, be sure the transition plan includes preparation that will facilitate applying to college, successful study skills, academic preparation and social preparation. That might include special attention to writing essays and test taking, intensive preparation in note-taking, individual and group study skills, problem-solving and other executive functioning skills, and learning to manage self, time and projects independently. All of these skills are crucial for college success and many are important life skills in general. Parents and teachers should start teaching these skills as children move from elementary into middle school.

One of the significant differences between high school and college is the structure, or lack of structure, in college. Most high schools operate on a fixed school day schedule from beginning to end, with periods of equal length. In college, this is rarely the case. Classes may last for 50 minutes one day and two hours the next. A student may have an 8:00 a.m. class, "free" time from 9 to 11, and a two hour lab from 11-1 p.m. For students who like and need a pre-structured, consistent schedule college does, indeed, present some challenges!

The keyword here is organize. Organize, organize, organize! Well before college life, teach the student to keep a schedule, or two or three. A daily, weekly, and semester schedule (with project due dates added) can be useful. Schedules can be kept on a cell phone, computer, or PDA, with alarm reminders for important events (like classes or tests). Students should also learn to keep a notebook for each class, preferably color-coded so they are sure to bring the right book to class. (Visual cues can be added to the schedule.) A schedule can go beyond academics to also include

events outside the classroom, such as club meetings, community events, family plans, holidays, etc. Adding a social/recreational component to the student's schedule while in middle and high school is good practice for the social opportunities available in college.

The lightly structured, variable schedule that characterizes college life leaves plenty of "free" time for students. This can be a huge challenge for college students with AS/HFA who struggle with organizing, planning and social interactions. When does one study and where? How much time needs to be devoted to each subject? What does a student do during down time? What happens on weekends?

A social calendar can help address some of these challenges. It can include what the student is going to do with their out of class time, where, with whom, and how long. It may seem like over-planning to schedule study time, meal time, or breaks like coffee in the student center at 10:00 a.m., but without that kind of structure many students with AS/HFA will spend their free time alone and in their room. Parents can get their child into the habit of keeping a social schedule while still in high school, occasionally checking the schedule to be sure it includes a variety of school and recreational activities, some with other people. Once in college, students may be able to get assistance with their schedule from a counselor or peer mentor.

Preparing students for the academic demands of college should also start early. College professors typically emphasize lectures, independent reading, and the application of knowledge to problem solving situations. Yet, many students with AS/HFA have difficulty with executive functioning skills: planning, organizing, identifying major/minor ideas, comparing and contrasting, breaking tasks down into smaller parts, etc. Even though their I.Q. may be high, they may struggle with the critical thinking skills required at the college level, such as identifying the most important information from lectures and textbooks. To compensate they try to remember *everything*- a difficult and anxiety-laden task when there is so much to learn. But even stellar memorization skills will not assure success, especially in classes where college professors place more value on understanding how to apply information to problems and case situations rather than on the rote repetition of facts.

Parents and educators can help students by teaching them to:

- Take good lecture notes in class. This can be done by hand, or using a small computer or other hand-held note taker. Or ask permission to audio-record the lecture to refer back to later.
- Request an outline or overheads of material from the teacher before class.
- Partner with a study buddy who can review their notes and highlight important points.
- Use a graphic organizer to identify and remember key information from a lecture or reading material. These organizers help students drill down to essential points. Examples are available on many websites; a collection of ready-to-use organizers are available at TeacherVision, www.teachervision.fen.com/graphic-organizers/printable/6293.html.

Knowledge application can be very challenging for students with AS/HFA who struggle with generalizing facts to new situations. A student with Asperger's in one of my college courses did poorly on a test. When I asked him why he said he had studied hard, even memorized the

textbook, but the answers to my questions often went beyond the text. He was right. I frequently include questions that require students to apply what they have learned to real life situations. I pointed out that we spend a lot of time in class doing these kinds of application activities and he should focus on how we work through these problems. I also set him up with a peer tutor who helped him review problem areas in the previous test and new ways to study for future tests. On the next test, the student earned an “A.” He learned critical thinking strategies. I learned that students with AS/HFA – even very bright students – are weak in this area but when given the right support, can achieve success.

Many of the academic challenges faced by students with AS/HFA arise from their difficulty with social interaction. College instructors usually value classroom participation and often include it as part of the grade. Many college courses include a substantial amount of group work - both in and outside the classroom. These activities can be roadblocks for students who have difficulty speaking in front of others or lack solid group social skills.

There are many things high school students (and their teachers) can do to prepare for the social interaction expected in college classrooms. Being comfortable using presentation software such as Powerpoint[®] is a must for class demonstrations and project presentations. Knowing how to structure an oral presentation so it flows coherently from beginning to middle to end is equally important. Give students multiple opportunities to practice before they reach college. Persevere when students shy away from such situations; these are vital skills for a college-bound student to learn. Build confidence and encourage class participation by spending a few minutes before class helping the student practice a response to a question, then calling on the student during class. Ensure the high school student has the pre-requisite social skills needed for group interaction: sharing space, asking questions, patient turn taking, listening and accepting others’ opinions, and perspective taking. These skills do not develop over night and many “book smart” students with AS/HFA will need months and months of practice before they can use these “social smart” skills successfully. Begin teaching these social skills well ahead of the transition to college; it is imperative that students come to college already equipped with them. College instructors are not likely to make classroom accommodations for students with such social learning differences.

Finally, there are the challenges and opportunities that living on campus, without the support of a family, presents. A student who doesn’t know how to manage his or her time independently, share space with others, understand the importance of good hygiene, and can prioritize tasks and activities, will arrive at college ill-equipped to achieve success. Although there is no way to fully prepare students for being on their own, students with AS/HFA may benefit from attending a residential camp during the one or two summer breaks preceding college. If possible, a camp hosted by a college would be ideal. Students get a feel for living with others on a college campus and the social skills needed to do so successfully. Contact the student services center at colleges in your area to inquire about camps they offer.

The transition from high school to college is difficult for most young adults. Students with AS/HFA have special challenges that must be addressed prior to college if they are to achieve success while in school. Students need to learn effective scheduling and study skills, be able to independently manage their time and their daily living needs, and have strong enough social skills so they can live and work with others. Most importantly, students and their

families need to know where to find help and when to ask for it. Most colleges and universities provide support for students with special needs. But, unlike in high school, colleges will not *require* that students get support, nor will professors step in and take charge of the situation. The responsibility rests with students themselves (or their families) to independently seek out and use the available services.

With the right preparation during middle and high school and individualized supports arranged ahead of time during college, students with AS/HFA can be successful in college, enjoy the academic and social experiences so characteristic of those years, and graduate eager to make their contribution to the world.

BIO

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Which College is Right?

There's no easy answer to that question. The "right" college for a student with AS/HFA will be the one that best meets the student's academic, social and lifestyle needs. In addition to the usual considerations of size, location, and academic offerings, students with AS/HFA and their parents should discuss the type of college that is well-suited to the student and the services offered by the college to students with disabilities. Two-year colleges, including community colleges, can be a good choice for many students with AS/HFA. Most are not residential and the transition from high school to college may not be as anxiety laden with this housing/independent living element removed. Plus, many two-year schools offer excellent support services for students with special needs.



If the student leans toward a four-year, residential school, be sure to visit the school - more than once if possible. Get a good feel for the pace of the school, typical dorm life, how much of a "party atmosphere" exists, what recreational activities are on and off campus that appeal to the student. Thoroughly investigate the support services and accommodations available for students with special needs.

Colleges are not required to provide the level of support services found in K-12 schools, and some do a better job than others. Probe carefully. A college that provides services for students with learning disabilities may not be skilled in serving students with AS/HFA. Ask how many students with AS/HFA they have served, and the specific services they provided.

Asperger Foundation International maintains a list of two and four year colleges and non-degree programs that are AS/HFA "friendly." <http://www.aspfi.org/college/#fouryear>

Find information about the rights of college students with disabilities at the U.S. Department of Education web site. <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html>.

Lars Perner, Ph.D., a college professor on the autism spectrum, offers great advice about choosing a college and achieving success in his article, “Preparing to be Nerdy Where Nerdy can be Cool: College Planning for Students on the Autism Spectrum.”
<http://www.professorsadvice.com/>

Applying and Getting Accepted

Choosing a college is just the first step. Next comes the application process: forms to complete, materials to submit, and fees to pay. Help your child or student practice those all important organization skills by suggesting he set up a spreadsheet to keep track of the application process at each college: date applied (and the application fee paid), date transcripts and test scores are sent, and date the application is mailed. Pay special attention to due dates; miss a deadline by one day and you are out!

A college application consists of more than grades and test scores and competition for acceptance at some schools is fierce. While it’s true that good high school grades and extra-curricular activities are very important, other parts of the application are equally relevant.

Standardized tests. Some students do not do well in the intense atmosphere of standardized tests. They may benefit from learning more about the tests, trying practice items, and learning the *strategy* of test taking to gain an edge.

Find information and sample tests for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) at <http://www.collegeboard.com>.

Information about the ACT test is available at <http://www.actstudent.org/testprep/index.html>.

Information about modifications to standard testing procedures is also available at these web sites.

Essays, Portfolios, and Letters of Recommendation. The college essay is a challenge for most students and can be doubly so for those with AS/HFA. While most spectrum students have the vocabulary and grammar skills to be successful, organizing their thoughts on paper and finding the right “voice” for a college essay can be difficult. It should not be too formal or too informal and should be appealing and interesting to read. Encourage students to have one or more people (other than a parent) review the first draft to check for obvious spelling and/or grammatical mistakes and offer comments on organization, thought flow, tone, and how well the essay responds to the question asked. Help a student work through as many drafts as are needed to present a polished essay.

Portfolios and letters of recommendation can spotlight an individual’s unique talents and expertise, often common among individuals with AS/HFA. Seek out letters of recommendation

that highlight a student's individual strong points, rather than add his or her name to a form letter. Portfolios can draw attention to the individuals' projects, accomplishments and awards, and demonstrate an ability to think in non-conventional and creative ways. Make sure portfolio materials are well organized and clear. A messy portfolio – no matter how creative - will not reflect well on the applicant.

College is a great option for many students with AS/HFA, offering the opportunity to grow intellectually and socially in a supportive environment. Although the college admission process can be daunting, it pays to be persistent.

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