

Post-Secondary Options

This informative publication ensued from the collaborative works of Family Network on Disabilities and ASAN. Family Network on Disabilities understands and respects the beliefs and opinions of those who choose not to use “Person First Language.”

At FND, we respectfully prefer to use “Person First Language.”

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Introduction

Finishing high school and moving into adulthood is complicated. It involves making many choices, often deciding between many options. This tipsheet has information to help you make these choices.

Would you like to go to college? If so, what would you like to learn there? There are good and bad things about community college, and about four-year colleges and universities. Whatever you decide to do, you may need accommodations. This tipsheet will offer advice on how to have your needs met in college.

Not everyone goes to school after finishing high school. Going directly into an internship or job is another option for gaining education and skills. This tipsheet will explain the good and bad things about this, as well as how you can get accommodations at your job.

Many people pursue a mix of all these postsecondary options. Whatever your goals, we hope this tipsheet will help you find a path that works for you.

What Is Transition?

A transition is simply a change. “Transition” means the process of changing from one way of life to another way of life. For autistic people, there are different transitions to face: from changing schools, to moving to a new house or moving out of your parent’s house, to finding a job.

Transitions can be difficult for anyone; most people take comfort in familiar settings. People with ASD often use routines in order to better navigate life, and a sudden change - beginning or leaving school, or getting a job - can be very unpleasant. Preparing people with autism for change, and making the change less sudden, makes this easier.

Many changes in life are unavoidable. Fortunately, you can cope with these changes.

Rights and Responsibilities

You have personal rights, and responsibilities, when it comes to making transitions. These rights mean you have control over your transition, such as how quickly you transition and where you decide to transition. You can decide the conditions of your transition.

The IDEIA - Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act - requires school districts to provide students with disabilities, including autism, with a free and appropriate public education. This means that your school district cannot make your parents pay for school because you are autistic, and your school district has to educate you according to how you learn best.

IDEIA also requires schools to start deciding where the student will go after public education by the student's 16th birthday.

You also have several responsibilities with your transition. You are responsible for your own school performance, you are responsible for learning social skills, and you will eventually need to learn to live on your own.

You may be given assistance in school without having to ask, such as study hall, tutors outside of class, extra time in class, or a private space to work. Or, you may have to ask for these things proactively - your teachers might not notice, for example, that you work better in private, and therefore not offer you a private work space before you ask. It is good to develop the skill of thinking, when you have trouble doing something, about what might help you do that thing more easily.

However, these aids can only help you to understand the course material. You must still *learn* the course material; your accommodations are meant to help you in that goal.

Developing social skills - making friends with classmates, and learning how to communicate with teachers and other school staff - will help you when you start looking for work. In school, you can learn social skills through everyday interaction with other students. At work, you need social skills *before* you can interact safely with coworkers and employers.

College students need to learn the skills they need to make good choices, and to plan their days. A college campus offers some easy decisions, such as access to places students gather to eat, study or socialize. Options for these things also exist off-campus. For example, some students may live in an apartment where they have a resident advisor. Students learn to handle tasks of everyday living such as grocery shopping, preparing meals, doing laundry, paying bills, and maintaining their apartments. While the students are ultimately responsible for managing these tasks, many parents and students find comfort knowing that support and guidance are always nearby.

Goals

When you consider an upcoming transition, you should have several goals in mind. If you are still in school, (K-12) and are younger than 22, you have the right to an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

An Individualized Education Program (IEP) can help the student with special needs to pursue a valuable and appropriate education. Getting used to the social environment of school takes support from parents, teachers and other school staff, as well as from other students.

Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination

Self-advocacy is, simply put, learning to stand up for yourself. Self-advocacy involves knowing when and how to negotiate for what you want. Successful self-advocacy often involves an amount of disclosure about oneself to reach the goal of better mutual understanding. In other words, it is sometimes needed in order to explain why an accommodation is necessary or helpful.

As a self-advocate, you will need to learn how to talk to others about your needs, and learn when to explain needs that should be kept private from some people. If you learn the right people to speak to, and learn how to talk to them, you can learn to trust them to understand your needs.

Self-determination, a similar concept, is about the idea that you have the right to decide your future. You have the right to be free from discrimination. This is because discrimination, whether at your job, at school, or in finding a place to live, can interfere with your quality of life and limit your ability to self-advocate.

High school program & graduate options

The prospect of choosing your own college courses can often be intimidating. There can be much pressure to choose the “right” courses and programs.

- ☐ It is very important to keep in mind that your choices are for you and not for anyone else. Make choices that will make you happy, because that is where you are most likely to succeed.
- ☐ If you already know what you want in your future and how to get it, it may be wise to still keep your options open, in case you change your mind.
- ☐ If you’re not certain whether you can handle a more difficult class, feel free to choose an easier class, or try the class if there is an option to drop it and choose the easier class later.
- ☐ Research possible career paths before choosing your courses or program. Even if you have no idea what you want to do, pick out a few things that you might enjoy, and find activities related to those careers - classes, volunteer opportunities, or extracurriculars.

Whether or not you have a plan for your future, use all of the resources available to you to help research your options. These resources can be books, the internet, your guidance counsellor, people who work in a field that interests you, or university students that are in a program you might like.

- ☐ There are websites for different types of careers that highlight some of the best workers in their field. They often include

interview-type articles where these workers discuss how they got to where they are now. These articles may serve as rough guidelines for figuring out your career path.

- ☐ College websites generally include possible career paths for every degree, so that you can see what you could do with the education that you receive.
- ☐ Speaking to a guidance counsellor can be frightening, but they are meant to be there to help you - it is their job to try to understand what you want, and help you figure out how to get what you want. If you do not feel comfortable speaking to a guidance counsellor directly, you may be able to email them.
- ☐ You can also pull various resources from the people around you. Do you or your parents know anyone in a field in which you are interested? It may be worth it to ask if you can spend a day or two with them on the job to see what a possible work day could be like. Do you have any friends who are studying a program in which you may be interested? You can ask them what student life is like.

In conclusion, remember:

- ☐ This is your life that you are living for you - not for anyone else. Make smart decisions that will make you happy not only in the moment, but for many years ahead.
- ☐ Many people are there to help you, even if it is very difficult to ask for it. In the long run, it will make your life easier to ask for help.

Traditional College

Traditional colleges are a type of “tertiary” schools - schools people go to after high school graduation. Students are almost always eighteen or older.

Being accepted into most traditional colleges requires a high school diploma or a GED. People who want to go to a traditional college usually look up many different colleges online, and choose a number of colleges that they like best.

This is usually based on things like:

- where the college is located: its distance from where they live, etc.
- what subjects the college is best known for teaching
- how “good” the college is in general
- what sorts of clubs or student socialization groups exist

The person then applies to all of these colleges. This involves sending them information, like a high school transcript or SAT scores, and often also involves writing an essay. Then they wait to see if their applications have been accepted. If more than one has been accepted, they choose one school from their options; if none have been accepted, they try to figure out what went wrong, and reapply the next year, perhaps to more schools.

Colleges give people who have studied for long enough degrees. The type of degree you get is based on how many credits you have completed. College classes are worth varying amounts of credits; this amount is usually between one credit and four credits. It takes about sixty credits to get an associate’s degree; this usually takes two years.

Bachelor’s degrees take about four years to complete.

You can find a traditional college to get just about any kind of degree you can imagine. What you choose to study depends on what you personally find interesting, what kind of job you want to have, and what kind of job you think will be the best fit or earn the most money. Degrees do not correlate perfectly with future jobs: for example, someone who wants to hire a writer might hire someone with a creative writing degree, or someone with a worldbuilding degree.

Traditional college is often very expensive, unless you can earn a scholarship or grant that pays for your education. Scholarships and grants are money awarded to people for things like having been very good at school, or for being involved in an extracurricular activity in high school. Scholarships can pay for either some or all of the costs of college. If you cannot get a scholarship or a grant, student loans are an option for paying for college; they are easier to get, but you have to pay them back in the future with interest.

College Autism Program

A number of colleges have programs for autistic students. A partial list of these can be found here: <http://goo.gl/IP3pgl>. These programs offer various supports, such as free therapy, accommodations, and financial backing.

Most colleges do not have such programs, and the ones that do vary widely in the supports they provide. These programs require you to disclose your diagnosis, and may have further requirements.

Modified College

Most people who go to college go to get a degree, and take about two years to get an associate's degree, four years to get a bachelor's degree, and six or eight years to get an advanced degree. However, there are other possible goals and other timescales that someone might use in college.

You may choose to take fewer credits than most students do. A full time student usually takes around twelve credits per semester - that's three or four classes. You might choose to take fewer classes, or classes that are easier and are worth fewer credits, if you work best when you have a lighter workload.

Community College

Community colleges are a higher education choice. Students go to community college after high school graduation. Students are 18 years old or older; many adults go to community colleges.

Some people attend full time and finish an associate's degree in two years. Other students take only a few classes at a time. It may take them more than two years to finish. When a student finishes all the classes in some programs, they get an associate's degree. In some states, when a student gets an associate's degree, they are automatically accepted into a 4 year college program. Then they have only two more years of study to get a Bachelor's degree.

Community colleges also have job training programs. A student does not have to go for two years to finish some

job training programs with a certificate. The certificate says a student has completed training in a career field. The certificate can help someone get a good job.

Most community colleges do not have dorms. Students usually live at home or in an apartment near the college campus. Students go to classes, go to the library, study, and meet friends on campus. They go home when they are done.

A community college may be a good place to continue learning after high school and getting skills for a job. Community colleges cost less than four year colleges. Many professors have taken classes to learn how to teach students with autism

(<http://www.communitycollegereview.com/articles/119>).

For students with autism or other disabilities, there may be help with tuition and other life skills. A student may be able to learn about things like first aid, personal safety, housing, finances, and medical care.

There are some organizations and publications to help students get what they need to succeed in community colleges. Click on these links to learn more:

1. <http://www.cccaid.org/>
2. <http://dafjmlate1fc5.cloudfront.net/uploads/assets/navigatingcollegehandbook-1-1.pdf>

Internships

Internships are a chance to learn and try out a job for a specified time period, usually as part of schooling.

In an internship, a person can decide if they like that sort of job and if they have all the abilities to do it.

On the negative side, not all internships are paid.

Many college students also participate in internships. Some internships are over the summer, when you may not have to worry about balancing the internship with school work. Additionally, it is often possible to participate in internships for credit. This means you can take fewer classes while you participate in your internship. Some colleges require internships, usually in your senior year. Not everyone participating in internships is necessarily in college. It is also possible to combine internships with work. For example, many people work to support themselves while they look for internships related to their interests. When choosing to mix college, employment, and internships, it's important to make sure that you're building a schedule that works for you. For example, if you're a student who already feels too overwhelmed by classes, you might struggle if you add much more to your schedule.

Employment

Having a job can boost someone's sense of self-worth. Working offers opportunities to meet people. Also, jobs pay money.

On the down side, a job takes up time during which someone might rather be doing something else. Many jobs are repetitive. Some jobs can increase a person's stress.

Autistic and non-autistic people have choices for employment. They can work for someone else. They can start their own business. They can choose a sheltered workshop (working only with other disabled people) or volunteer work.

Your school may offer transition services. Most areas have a "One-Stop", where you can get help finding a job. States offer "vocational rehabilitation" services: helping you understand how employment will affect your benefits, testing for preferences and ability, job search help, and referring you to a job coach, if needed. A job coach would accompany you to your job and help

your employer and co-workers understand how best to work with you.

Everyone, regardless of abilities or disabilities should be treated with respect at their job. No one can be paid less than the federal minimum wage.

Employers expect workers to show up whenever they are scheduled, to be on time, and to be industrious.

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, employers must make reasonable (not too expensive, and not affecting the core responsibilities of the job) adjustments in the workplace or responsibilities, to help people with disabilities be able to perform their jobs. One example is letting someone work in a quiet part of the building if they are sensitive to loud sounds.

Mixed Programs

Many people choose a mix of college, employment, and internships. There are many possible ways of doing this. Both full-time and part-time college students have multiple employment and internship opportunities. One employment opportunity, in college, is work-study. Work-study is usually, but not always, limited to a few hours per week on-campus. Work-study jobs are very diverse, and can involve doing almost any kind of job. Occasionally work-study jobs can be off-campus, such as tutoring children at a local school.

Even students who are not given work-study often find part-time employment on campus. Some advantages to working an on-campus job are:

- These tend to be easier to apply for than off-campus jobs.
- Many on-campus jobs can be less demanding than typical

employment, and do not involve working as many hours. For example, many student workers are allowed to do their homework at work if they have no conflicting job duties.

- For people who live on or near campus, an on-campus job relieves some of the stress of commuting to work.

Student employment is, of course, not limited to on-campus. Many students, especially part-time students, have jobs off-campus. Off-campus jobs often pay more, and the hours tend to be less limited than on-campus jobs. For people who need to support themselves or others, off-campus work can often be necessary.

Disability Services

When you get to college, you will no longer have a 504 plan or an IEP. However, this does not mean you will no longer be eligible to accommodations and supports.

Every college will have an office for Student Disability Services. Different colleges will call this office different things, but every school will have one. Student disability service offices can help students with disabilities identify and get the accommodations and supports they need in order to succeed.

In college, it is not the responsibility of disability services to find you--it is your responsibility to identify yourself and seek them out. Most student disability service offices will have contact information available on the college website.

In order to be eligible for student disability services, you may need to provide documentation of your disability.

Next Steps

In the modern world, one's post-secondary options, or life after high school graduation, are vital to determining one's level of success and opportunity for advancement. As a result, teachers, counselors, parents, and students alike place a tremendous amount of emphasis on post-secondary options and planning. There are many post-secondary options for students to choose from in a variety of fields and trades. However, not all post-secondary options are one in the same nor do they yield the same results.

While there are many post-secondary options to choose from, there are steps that students must follow in order to make a happy and wise decision.

Among these include:

- Knowing your options and what they bring
- Knowing individual strengths, challenges, and needs
- Knowing if and how your options address your individual needs

There are many post-secondary options to choose from, including:

- 2 year college/university
- 4 year college/university
- Post-graduate/professional schools (a prior college degree is often necessary for this)
- Technical/vocational schools
- Internships
- Military service (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, National Guard, Coast Guard, etc.)

There is nothing wrong with asking others, such as teachers, parents, siblings, friends, or co-workers for input. This will only help you make an informed decision.

It's also important to note that while many jobs and careers are requiring college degrees, having one isn't necessary for success, and college isn't for everyone. Everyone deserves the opportunity to be successful, and planning ahead can make a huge difference to your chances of success.

Further Resources

Navigating College:

<http://www.navigatingcollege.org/>

Think College:

<http://www.thinkcollege.net/>