

A Spectrum of Possibility: Tips for Prospective College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Parents, school counselors, teachers, and others provide the best support when they learn about the interests, strengths, and concerns of students on the autism spectrum. A positive college experience requires students to seriously consider who they are and who they want to be. Students should consider strengths, support needs, goals, and expectations to find a college that is the best fit for them.

Students on the spectrum enrolled full-time at Virginia's colleges and universities offered the following tips. Their advice comes from their experiences and a thoughtful reflection about preparing for college and taking steps towards timely completion of college programs.

Selecting a college

Choosing a college requires consideration of multiple factors including one's academic interests, personal goals, support needs, and perceived comfort with the college setting. To compare options, students should visit several campuses. Sometimes, college data and facilities can be superseded by the feelings students derive when on campus.

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When I went to [my college] it was a place that I felt safe, that I felt I could withdraw into myself when I needed to, that I could pull back and survive when that was necessary. But when that wasn't necessary, I could reach out. I could explore both socially and just around campus. It was a good place for me to live because it would encourage personal growth.

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Requesting accommodations

It is the student's choice to request academic accommodations in college. Accommodations may reduce stress and strengthen academic performance. College students have more control regarding accommodations than they did in high school. Students can choose to share accommodation letters in some classes and with some professors but not others.

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You have to reach out to the disability services...If you need more time during testing, if you need tutoring you need to seek it out...A lot of that is self-advocacy, is telling people what you really need and how you work the best...If you tell people how you need help, they're going to give you that help. If you don't they won't know how to.

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Creating a system for managing your time

Each day offers multiple decisions and making all these decisions can be stressful, but personalized schedules can help. In college, the basis of each day is class time. With that information, students can schedule daily times for studying, eating, socializing, eating, exercising, and sleeping. As schedules repeat, this practice encourages development of routines that can reduce stressful decision making and assure that academic responsibilities are fulfilled in a timely fashion.

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...managing all the tasks, all the projects, labs, extracurriculars, all of that, and managing to stay on top of what you need to do and live a fulfilling life.

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Making effort and taking ownership

Much of academic success in college can be attributed to effort. While students might find some classes more interesting and engaging than others, students must take ownership of and develop discipline in their academic participation.

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Sometimes it's not about being smart, sometimes it's not about being athletic, or charming, but it's about heart. It's about just putting down the effort, putting in the work and being on something, like a craft let's say, and maybe even a piece of metal to where you can shape it into something beautiful and that's yours.

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Reinventing oneself

College students on the spectrum may find that the university offers an opportunity for reinvention. This transformation, partially derived from opportunities to grow, relieves past stressors and burdens. As students become more comfortable with their identities, they perform better in college.

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That freedom to reshape myself into who I wanted to be, not what other people wanted me to, but the best possible version of me, really, it was freeing. I was able to take that, go to college, and say, "No one here knows me. What would this best possible version of me do?" and I did my best to live that.

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For more information, please see our video series *A Spectrum of Possibility*: centerontransition.org/asd. This four part video series highlights experiences and advice from college students with ASD as well as parents, high school counselors, and college professors. The series was produced by Virginia Commonwealth University's Center on Transition Innovations with funding from the Virginia Department of Education.

Additional resources

Tips for Students with Autism Who are Entering College: themighty.com/2016/08/tips-for-students-with-autism-who-are-entering-college

Prince-Hughes, D. (2002). *Aquamarine blue 5: Personal stories of college students with autism*. Athens: Swallow Press.