

A Spectrum of Possibility: School Counselor & School Psychologist Tips for College Seeking Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

By providing transition guidance and promoting college readiness, school counselors can help prepare students with autism to access and achieve success in postsecondary education. School counselors and psychologists working in Virginia high schools with students on the spectrum offered the following tips. Their advice comes from their professional experiences and a thoughtful reflection about helping students with autism with their transition to college.

Assist with stress & anxiety management training for students in transition

Transitioning from high school to college is a significant life change which can increase stress. School counselors hold a unique position to assist students in monitoring wellness and developing career pathways that may include college. School counselors can ease the transition related stress and feelings of being overwhelmed by clarifying college expectations, providing strategies for mitigating stressful events, and supporting life skills development.

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If you don't have a spouse or a friend or someone that you can talk to about things, life is very hard. Who's he going to vent with, next year? When he goes off to [college] who's he going to have that he can come to?

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Share college expectations beyond admissions and academic requirements

School counselors can help to lessen stress and support students in transition by helping them to develop important, non-academic skills necessary to navigate college. This might include creating opportunities to further develop social skills and plans to support executive functioning. High school graduates with ASD who currently attend college are an excellent resource for preparing others who are entering. They can share resources, strategies, and lessons learned.

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I met with a group...they were all on the spectrum...to get them to socialize with one another. What I find at the high school level is if they can make one friend and often time one person... They tend to understand each other better and it works.... It was set up more informally, by the counselors, by me. It's just making sure they got to meet one another.

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Include family in counseling process

Family support is essential for reinforcing student preparation for college and a more independent life in general. However, transition is a team effort and counselors can partner with transition coordinators, case managers, and parents to communicate salient skills for college admission and retention.

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I ask parents...What do you do now that you think next year or in two years when he goes away to college, that he's going to have to do by himself? I get a list and then I say, we need to start now. So that it becomes more natural for [students] to do that. Whether it's compiling to do lists for them...whatever works for them, so that they have a system down so that when they start going to classes they have a plan.

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Select college settings that fit support needs

Much of college success can be attributed to “fit,” but the meaning of that concept is not always clear. Counselors can expose students to multiple options from 2-year/community colleges, four-year colleges and universities, and colleges with programs devoted to providing additional supports for students on the spectrum (for example, MoSAIC at UT Chattanooga and Circle of Support at Western Kentucky University). Some college options allow for incremental transition, others holistically support students on the spectrum, while some colleges only provide basic accommodations for students who advocate for them.

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Many colleges now are developing programs now that are taking over a lot of jobs that mom had. Organizing your supplies... making sure you talk to the professor... If a child can't develop those skills on their own when they're in a four year institution... a lot of these programs are extremely helpful.

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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

Dipleolu, A. O., Storlie, C., & Johnson, C. (2014). Transition to college and students with high functioning autism spectrum disorder: Strategy considerations for school counselors. *Journal of School Counseling, 12*(11), 1-38.

Krell, M., & Perusse, R. (2012). Providing college readiness counseling for students with autism spectrum disorders: A delphi study to guide school counselors. *Professional School Counseling, 16*(1), 29-39.