



# The Road to Post-Secondary Education: Questions to Consider

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Thinking about post-secondary education? Whether you are a parent or an individual with an autism spectrum disorder, you probably have a lot of questions. How does the application process work? What sort of educational program is right for me? What type of supports and services can I expect at college? The article is meant to be a first step for individuals with autism spectrum disorders and parents interested in post-secondary options. This article was not written to provide answers, but to highlight questions that are important to ask yourself, and your son or daughter to begin the exploration process of post-secondary education.

A misconception that many hold is that post-secondary education only includes 4-year universities and colleges. Therefore, it is important to explain the category of post-secondary education and all that it encompasses. Post-secondary education encompasses 4-year universities, 2-year colleges that offer associates' degrees, vocational schools and adult education. Adult education classes are courses typically offered through the community, and are non-degree oriented.

The key to successful post-secondary educational experiences is that individuals with autism spectrum disorders become acutely aware and knowledgeable about their own accommodation needs. In addition to being cognizant of these needs, students must be able to articulate accommodation needs when communicating with universities, disability services and/ or with other entities. Being familiar with what the student needs to succeed in school is ultimately the responsibility of the individual with the disability. Below are a sampling of questions we feel are pertinent to ask yourself when preparing for a post-secondary experience.

## Getting Prepared for All Post-Secondary Options

### START EARLY!

This section is simply addressing your basic interest areas. Answering the questions below can help you decipher which post-secondary experience is right for you. Remember that these questions get more at what you want as opposed to what you think is possible. Do not place any limits on yourself when answering questions in this section. Remember that addressing one's needs and meeting one's desires is a balancing act for all, whether we have a disability or not.

We encourage everyone to dream. However, we acknowledge that making dreams come true can be hard work. Give yourself plenty of time to plan and to create a memorable post-secondary experience. Frequently, the less time you leave for planning the more problems you will encounter later. For example, it is possible that living away from home does not seem feasible to you. It is important, though, to state what you want. Questions are listed below to help you determine what you will need to make specific situations work. For example, you may want to leave home. However, you may feel that you require a certain amount of support that you are currently getting from family. It may be difficult to picture receiving this support outside your family network. Questions to answer to help you determine what you really want include:

- Why are you pursuing a post-secondary experience?
- Do you know what job/career interests you?
- Is it a career where a 2 or 4 year degree is necessary?
- Is it a job/career that requires a certificate from a technical or vocational school?
- Do you want to attend a small or large campus?
- Do you want to live in a big city or in a small town?
- If you are desiring a college degree, do you know what major you might want?
- What future job options will this degree lead to?
- Do you want to live at home with family, or away from home with or without a roommate?

## Course of Study

Before choosing a college or other post-secondary program to attend, there are questions you should ask yourself about what you want to study and/or what major you want to pursue. When choosing a four year college, many students do not choose a major until after their first year is completed and/or a certain number of course credits have been successfully completed. Your choice of a major or course of study may help to pinpoint the type of school you want to attend. There are two- and four-year programs as well as technical and specialized training schools available depending on the program/major chosen. Some schools have entrance requirements such as test scores that need to be met.

Some individuals with autism spectrum disorders have intense interests and strengths that make the selection of an area of study very easy. Some questions to consider when choosing a major or area of study include the following:

- What are your interests and strengths?
- What is your career goal? In other words, in what field do you envision working? For example, if you are interested in working on or for a newspaper, you may want to think of a major in journalism.
- What are the entrance requirements for the program(s) that interest you?
- How many credits/classes are required to complete the major/program with a diploma and/or other certificate?
- What is the average length of time that it takes students to complete the program?
- What courses (if any) are all students required to take, regardless of their major/program?
- Is there support offered for advanced students to "test out" of some basic classes?
- Is there support offered to students who need to take remedial classes?

## Distance

Deciding whether you want to leave home is one of the first decisions you need to make. In other words, are you ready to leave the house where you have grown up? Or do you want to wait to leave home? Are you more comfortable entering college (a new chapter of your life) from the security of your home? Perhaps, dealing with college life and expectations will be enough of a challenge that you don't want to bring about other life changes. Perhaps you simply want to save your money by not having to pay room and board. All of the above are considerations for people to think about as they explore post-secondary education. The decision about where you want to live will help define the post- secondary opportunities that will be logical for you to choose from.

- Do you want to leave home?
- If so, how far away do you want to go?
- How often will you want to go home? If you are thinking about traveling out of state or a fair distance, will going home at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and spring break be sufficient for you?

- Will travel home be possible from the school that you are thinking about?
- If commuting, how far will you need to travel daily?
- Do you have the supports (e.g., financial, other person) in place to allow such travel on a regular basis?
- Do you receive supports within your home that would need to be recreated if you were to leave home? If so, who might provide that support? Who might fund that type of support? Are you open to receiving personal support from individuals with whom you are unfamiliar?
- Do distance education classes or correspondence courses appeal to you?

## Campus and Community Environment

The size and location of the campus you are going to attend should be decided. What is right for you? Choosing the size of the school that you wish to attend is an individual choice. A size that is good for one person is not necessarily going to work for another. Some people prefer very small schools where it is possible to know everyone who attends. Other people like the variety that a large school offers. Some people who are shy and have difficulty making social connections may favor smaller post-secondary experiences. Questions to answer about the size of a school include the following:

- How many students are enrolled?
- How many students live on campus?
- How many students commute?
- What is the average class size?
- How many academic buildings are on campus?
- Are the buildings on campus large with many floors or small with one or two stories?
- Are there specific buildings or areas on campus for specific majors?
- What atmosphere are you looking for (e.g., a place to hide in the crowd, a place with more individualized attention to students)?

Most people feel comfortable in an environment that feels familiar. Choosing a program location that offers a comfortable atmosphere should also be addressed. Questions to answer about the location of a school include the following:

- What size is the community? Small, mid-size or large?
- What opportunities for recreation are offered on campus? In the community?
- What opportunities for entertainment are offered on campus? In the community?
- What opportunities for shopping are available on campus? In the community?
- What transportation, if any, is needed or offered on campus? In the community?
- Is student parking for bikes and cars easy to access?
- How long is the average walk from one class to the next?
- How safe is the campus? The community?

Thinking about the campus and community environment of a college or other post-secondary program is important to the comfort and success of your experience.

## Housing

Where will you live while pursuing your post-secondary program? What is realistic? Is living at home most important? Or is living away from home a goal? If social activities and meeting others is important to you, living on

campus or in a dorm might be the best choice. If you want to live away from home, then there are questions to ask yourself which include the following:

- Do you want to live on campus, or off campus?
- What housing is available on campus? What housing options are available off campus?
- Do you want or need a roommate(s)? Reasons for wanting/needing a roommate could be to help financially, socially, or for other reasons. If you want a roommate, what are your reasons?
- Do you need/prefer to have meals prepared for you versus meals prepared by yourself?
- How/where is your laundry to be done?
- Is your housing close enough to your classes?
- Do you want to live where there are planned activities for residents to do together?
- Do you want to live where there are rules such as curfews and visiting hours for guests?

## Student Population

Post-secondary programs are not mandatory and not all people are motivated or interested in training for jobs or careers after completing high school. Students enrolled in post-secondary programs may have a variety of interests and expectations about a social life with fellow students. Questions to ask about the student population of a particular program may include the following:

- Would you prefer a program where your gender (or the opposite gender) dominates the student population, or is a more even ratio of male to female students important?
- Is the racial and/or ethnic diversity of the students a factor in your decision?
- Do you want to attend a school that has a particular secular focus?
- Is building relationships with other students important to you?
- Are there clubs, study groups or other organizations on campus that were developed around a particular theme or interest?
- Are there extracurricular activities offered that are purely social in nature? Are these activities designed to specifically support meeting other students?
- Are there fraternities/sororities or service groups on campus where students may live together and/or in the same vicinity?
- How large is the student body in general? Do you want a situation where it is easier to know most/all people in your chosen field of study?

## Getting Prepared - Specifically for 4-Year Universities: Tests and More Tests

The test score factor is only a consideration for those individuals who are contemplating a 4-year school. The tests that are typically used as prerequisites to 4-year colleges tend to be the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Test (ACT). Scores that students earn on the SAT and the ACT are used by colleges as a part of the admissions process. It is important to know which test scores are preferred by the college that you are targeting. At this time, most colleges tend to accept scores from either examination. However, there is a tendency for midwest and southern schools to prefer the ACT. Likewise, eastern and western schools prefer the SAT. If a school states a preference for one test over the other, that does not mean that the other test is not acceptable. It simply means that they have a preference.

The Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) is usually taken as a sophomore in high school. The purpose of the PSAT is to offer students an opportunity to practice these exams. The PSAT is shorter in length than the SAT. It is 2 hours long. However, it covers the same subject areas. It has a verbal section as well as a math section. Taking

the PSAT as a sophomore is good planning. It can help you realize what areas you might need to work on prior to taking the SAT or the ACT.

You can check with guidance counselors at school to get the schedule of where and when the tests will be administered and what you will need to do to register. If you need accommodations to take these tests, they should be provided. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, if you receive accommodations to take tests throughout the typical school year (e.g., extended time, alternative format) then you are entitled to have similar accommodations on these exams. Check with a guidance counselor to help ensure that you are receiving the support that you are entitled to receive.

## Support Services

Many post-secondary schools and training programs provide auxiliary aids, accommodations, and support services that enhance the educational experience of students with autism and other disabilities. As stated earlier, it is essential that students take ownership for their accommodation needs and understand their educational responsibilities. When speaking with the office or department that organizes support services, it is important to understand what services and supports are routinely offered. It is also important to realize that post-secondary institutions are just beginning to meet the needs of people with autism spectrum disorders. Therefore, it is also crucial to understand and communicate your needed supports for attending post-secondary education.

You might require a support that is typically not offered. This does not mean that the post-secondary program cannot help meet your needs, but it is also no guarantee that all of your needs will be met. The better you understand your support needs and can articulate them, the more likely you will be to have a respectful conversation and negotiation process. While exploring the world of post-secondary education, here are some questions that you may find helpful when meeting with disability service staff:

- Is pre-registration, registration assistance, or priority class registration available?
- Is there flexibility in scheduling classes?
- Is there flexibility in course requirements such as class substitution or waivers if a student's disability impairs his/her ability to take a particular required course?
- Is extended time available for taking exams, doing term papers, and completing other assignments? In addition, are time extensions allowed for completion of the entire course or class?
- Is there a special orientation for new students?
- What is the physical accessibility of the campus? You need to check this out for yourself. Do not rely on reports from others.
- Is job/career placement support available after program completion? Are the placement services targeted for students with autism spectrum disorders and other disabilities?
- Are readers, books on tape, classroom note takers or transcriptions available?
- Are interpreter services available?
- Are there tutors to assist with ongoing classwork?
- Is adaptive technology such as assistive listening devices and talking computers available?
- What office or department is responsible for supporting students with autism spectrum disorders and other disabilities? What type of supports are available through this program?
- Is counseling available for assistance in accessing disability benefits such as Vocational Rehabilitation and Social Security benefits?
- Are there mentorship or apprenticeship programs available?

## Finances

Finances may be a factor when choosing a post-secondary experience. Over the years, colleges and universities have continued to get more and more expensive. If the financial piece of your post-secondary puzzle is important to consider, you may want to think about attending a vocational school or a 2- year college. These options tend to be less expensive. As a student, you do not need to worry about costs for room and board. Typically, on-campus housing is not an option for 2-year and vocational schools. In addition, 2 year and vocational schools do not have those hidden costs that are associated with keeping up the campus and the athletic department.

Overall, it is important to plan well in advance if you are going to require financial aid. You may not need financial aid for tuition or even housing. However, you may need a specific type of support that the disability services office for the school can not fund at 100%. Therefore, you may need to have financial support to have the best educational situation possible.

Questions that you might want to ask yourself are as follows:

- Are finances a primary consideration when I think about post-secondary education?
- Will I need to take out a loan to cover educational expenses?
- Am I on the Medicaid Waiver? Will my Waiver pay for any of my expenses?
- Am I eligible for the Medicaid Waiver? How long is the waiting list for the Medicaid Waiver? Please note that if you are looking at the Medicaid Waiver as an option to defray costs, you should apply no later than the persons 14th birthday due to waiting lists.
- Am I eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation services?
- Will Vocational Rehabilitation be willing to support a part of my education? If so, what are their terms?
- What scholarships are available? Please note, many scholarships have certain criteria (e.g., certain score on ACT or SAT, certain grade point average). Therefore, you may want to be knowledgeable about the criteria while going through high school.
- Is there a financial aid office affiliated with the program you are considering? If so, what financial assistance is offered through the financial aid office?

Life after high school is a major transition for all individuals. For the person with an autism spectrum disorder, this change can seem even more complex and demanding. Gathering information and preparing ahead can ease the anxiety and stress of planning and preparing for a post-secondary educational program. With careful planning and the proper supports, people with autism can avoid some of the struggles and enjoy a successful and meaningful post- secondary experience.

The ideas and questions proposed in this article are suggested to assist individuals in addressing important aspects of choosing a post-secondary educational program. The ultimate goal is a successful educational experience which prepares the individual for a productive and meaningful job or career.

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Wheeler, M. (2000). The road to post-secondary education: Questions to consider. *The Reporter*, 5(2), 3.