

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS AND CHOOSING COLLEGE COURSES

By Julie Coulter

We just took our son, Drew, who has Asperger Syndrome, back to college for his senior year. Time has really flown. It's hard to believe he'll graduate next spring. Preparing to take him back to school this year was easier than getting him ready to go his freshman year.

Are you helping a student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) prepare for his or her freshman year of college? Most of us spend a lot of time assembling books and notebooks, gathering dorm room furnishings and preparing transportation plans. We also need to spend some time preparing our students to choose a major course of study and making sure that they understand how to select classes, register for courses, and track course completion.

DEVELOP A LONG TERM PLAN

Your student will need to develop a long-term plan for each year of college and schedule each required course for his or her chosen field of study. Some students may choose to take a lighter course load and graduate in five years instead of four. Faculty advisors can help students develop a long term plan -- and continually review and adjust it to fit their needs. If a student decides to change her major or field of study, then the plan will have to change to accommodate the new courses. During his sophomore year, Drew considered changing his major to forensic science. He discovered that his college was in the process of adding the forensic science major and would not have all the courses available in time for Drew to complete them and graduate in four years as he had planned.

CHOOSE A MAJOR FIELD OF STUDY

Some students may know exactly where they want to work after college. For those who need direction, both high school and college counselors can help students evaluate various careers. When Drew decided to change his major during his junior year, his school's career services counselor agreed to meet with Drew once a week and helped him take the "Discovery" on-line career aptitude test. The counselor also helped Drew look at several career and "course of study" options. She pointed out his writing strengths, which helped him decide to concentrate on technical writing.

If your student is considering a career that will require graduate studies, look at the entrance requirements for those programs. Among other career paths, Drew considered library science. He learned that this path required graduate work and that he would need a B+ average in his undergraduate work to apply for the library science graduate program at a university close to us.

The book, "Developing Talents: Careers for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism" by Temple Grandin and Kate Duffy -- published by the Autism Asperger Publishing Company -- is a great resource for students who are evaluating different careers and fields of study.

LEARN TO ASK FOR HELP

Some students with ASDs may be reluctant to ask for help. Some may need help understanding their responsibility in selecting courses. You can help your student by going over the college or university course catalog together and talking through the course selection process. Every college or university has its own method of class registration. Some colleges provide "peer advisors" (third year college students who advise freshman students) as well as faculty advisors. I encourage parents to stay in close communication during the first few weeks as students begin classes.

Students need to understand their school's policy for dropping or adding a course. Encourage your student to ask for help during the first few days of classes if he needs to make a change. You may have to find out by trial and error how much help to provide and when you risk stepping

over the line to become a hovering "helicopter parent." Your goal is to help your student take responsibility for getting the right courses so he can become increasingly independent and successful in college.

DECIDE ON DISCLOSURE TO PROFESSORS

Students with a disability need to decide whether to disclose that disability to professors. Each college or university will have a process for students to inform professors if they require special accommodations.

The Office of Disability Services at Drew's college provides a written guide for all professors with information about each type of disability represented within the student body. Drew is responsible for taking a copy of his class schedule to the Office of Disability Services, which then generates a letter about Drew and his special needs that is addressed to each of his professors. Drew is responsible for delivering the completed letters. Some students may feel comfortable meeting with their professors to discuss the letter. Others may prefer to simply deliver the letter. This process requires the students to actively participate in the process and encourages them to advocate for themselves.

LEARN ABOUT THE WORK WORLD

Students who have a part-time job will also learn the basics of the work world: being on time, learning a work process and interacting with co-workers. Students with autism spectrum disorders can benefit from working part-time while they're in college -- as long as the job doesn't create too much pressure and or take up too much study time. For the first time this year, Drew will have a work-study job on campus. He hopes to land a job in the library -- his favorite place!

BECOME A PLANNER

Learning to manage college studies, self-care, social engagements and volunteer activities is a big job. I learned from a professional at a conference about a good planning tool -- a combination of a "To Do" list and a calendar called the PlannerPad (available at <https://plannerpads.com/index.asp>). Whatever planning tools he uses, encourage your student to take time every day to plan his activities and record his completed tasks.

We talked to Drew tonight on the phone and he's excited about his new classes and has plans to meet his friends to play "Dungeons and Dragons" this weekend. I miss having him around to help out with our business, to grocery shop and to mow the lawn. Most of all, I miss how much fun it is to have Drew around.

I'm compensated by the knowledge that Drew is completing his senior year of college. I'm an unabashedly proud mom!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Julie Coulter is the writer of "The College Prep Portfolio," which helps students prepare throughout high school to apply for college. You can find more articles on her website at:

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