

Thinking of Post-Secondary Education?

Considerations for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Their Families

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Colleges and universities throughout Ontario report that, more than ever, individuals who have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) are seeking a post-secondary education. This reflects the trend of earlier diagnosis and intervention, and our ability to identify individuals with milder forms of ASDs such as Asperger Syndrome. Although this trend is encouraging, post-secondary education presents some challenges for individuals with an ASD and for the systems of support at colleges and universities. Fortunately, universities and colleges are committed to being accessible to a wide range of students with disabilities. In the following article, we describe some of the key considerations for individuals who may be considering post-secondary education, and for their families.

Is post-secondary education the right choice for me now?

Post-secondary education can be useful in helping to decide future career paths and interests; however, it is also expensive, limits time available for other pursuits and skill development, and can be stressful. It is important to ensure the choice to attend post-secondary relates directly to the career or academic goals of the student.

There are times when preparing for work, gaining work or volunteer experience, or developing other life skills is a better alternative. If there are significant mental health, life skill or behavioural difficulties the individual with ASD is still struggling with during or after high school, it is important that these be adequately addressed before considering post-secondary education. Many students report that high school has been a stressful experience and they may need a period of a year or two when fewer demands, both academic

and social, are placed on them. However, it is important that there be some expectations as well as regular activities and a daily schedule during this time.

Should I go to college or university?

Colleges of applied arts and technology have full- and part-time diploma and certificate programs. Many also have bachelor degrees in applied areas of study, transfer programs that allow students to earn credits towards a university degree, as well as pre-trades and apprenticeship training, language training and skills upgrading. Colleges usually stress applied learning and focus on career training and trades and include hands-on training and co-op placement opportunities.

Universities have degree programs, including undergraduate (Bachelor's) and graduate (Master's and Doctoral) degrees. Many offer professional programs, such as medicine, dentistry and law. They usually focus on academic and professional training and place a greater emphasis than colleges on research and abstract/critical thinking. Universities have higher entrance requirements and most programs demand considerable amounts of reading and high standards of writing.

Is a larger or smaller institution better?

The benefit of larger institutions is that they typically offer a wider selection of programs and courses. Depending on the nature of students' interests, this may be a crucial advantage over smaller schools. In addition, there are often more support programs and services available for students with ASDs both within the school and in the surrounding community.

Although there can be benefits to attending a larger school, some students with ASDs are overwhelmed by the numbers of students and navigating the campus--usually in a larger town or city. Smaller institutions often have smaller class sizes, are easier to navigate, and may allow for more access to instructors and other services. However, it is important to ensure the necessary supports and services are available either at the school itself or in the community and that they offer a suitable program of study. Sometimes, a small school in a medium-to-large size city is a good way to benefit from the advantages of a smaller school while being able to access supports in the community.

Where should I live?

The living situation for a student with ASD can mean the difference between a successful school experience and an unsuccessful one. When considering living arrangements, it is important to consider the social goals and challenges of the student, how much privacy they prefer/require, sensory differences (e.g. sensitivity to sound or light), preferences or routines around food and sleep, and how much support has previously been provided by parents or others at home. Living off-campus on their own is an alternative that is appealing for many individuals with ASDs and their families for these reasons.

Many students choose to live away from home and want to live in a college or university residence. This option offers an opportunity for increased independence, and provides social opportunities. In addition, many residences offer meal plans and are located close to classes. At the same time, there are considerable social expectations, limited privacy, minimal daily living supports and supervision, and the possibility of sound and activity at all hours. If a decision is made to live in residence, it is useful to see the residence in advance and during the school year. Inquiring about the possibility of a private room may also be helpful, as it may be possible to request a private room based on a diagnosis of ASD. Living in a residence or in an off-campus apartment part-time (e.g., on weekdays only) in the same town or city as family, provides an opportunity for the student to be more independent than if they were at home, with the support of friends and family nearby.

Consideration always needs to be given to the degree of independence the student already displays at home when considering their future living situation. If the daily requirements of living alone (e.g., getting to bed and out

of bed on time, eating properly, spending adequate time on studies and not on hobbies or interests, taking medication regularly, managing money) are not already exhibited or within the student's ability, this lack of life skills will adversely affect academic performance. If the student is living off-campus, transportation systems and routes should be identified, particularly in small communities where there may not be a regular bus service.

Are there specialized services for students with ASDs at colleges and universities?

Some colleges and universities have introduced specialized services and supports for students with ASDs such as mentoring programs and on campus social groups. Many times, these can be found on the university's website or by speaking to the Disability Office. Some disability advisors have extensive experience supporting students with ASDs; however advisors experienced with mental health, learning, attention, and medical disabilities also have a wealth of experience to bring to the process of supporting the student with an ASD. Specialized services such as counselling, academic coaching or tutoring and psychological assessment can be purchased on- or off-campus through the OSAP bursary for eligible students with special needs. Some colleges have also developed college programs for students with intellectual or developmental disabilities and these can be suitable for some individuals on the spectrum.

What is the role of parents?

Entering a post-secondary setting can be stressful for parents as well! Often families need to discuss their role with a professional, as their young adult transitions to greater independence; the role of families in the transition to college or university is no exception. Although family members are usually less involved at this time in the student's life, there are important tasks which parents can take on. These include anticipating potential areas of need in the post-secondary environment, helping to describe the supports/accommodations received previously, promoting the students' ability to self-advocate, and providing and/or arranging additional supports and help in managing institutional communication. (It is important to note that written consent of the student is required for direct communication between Disability Offices and parents.) Often preparations need to be made for a comprehensive psychological evaluation of the student.

This is best planned in the last term or semester of secondary school, so teachers and other school personnel can be interviewed by the assessing psychologist, if necessary.

Where do we start?

When considering a program or institution it is important there be a thorough orientation to the campus and the surrounding community. Walks around the campus should ideally occur when classes are in progress and when they are not. Tours of campuses and residences are also offered and questions about meal plans and private rooms can be addressed then. A great deal of information about universities and supports can now be accessed on-line. It is also important to become familiar with the services and supports available on campus and off, and their experience with students with ASDs. Finally, it can be useful to have an orientation to the Office for Students with Disabilities, and to learn about their services. Some Offices for Students with Disabilities offer an orientation before the start of school and this is also helpful to know about.

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