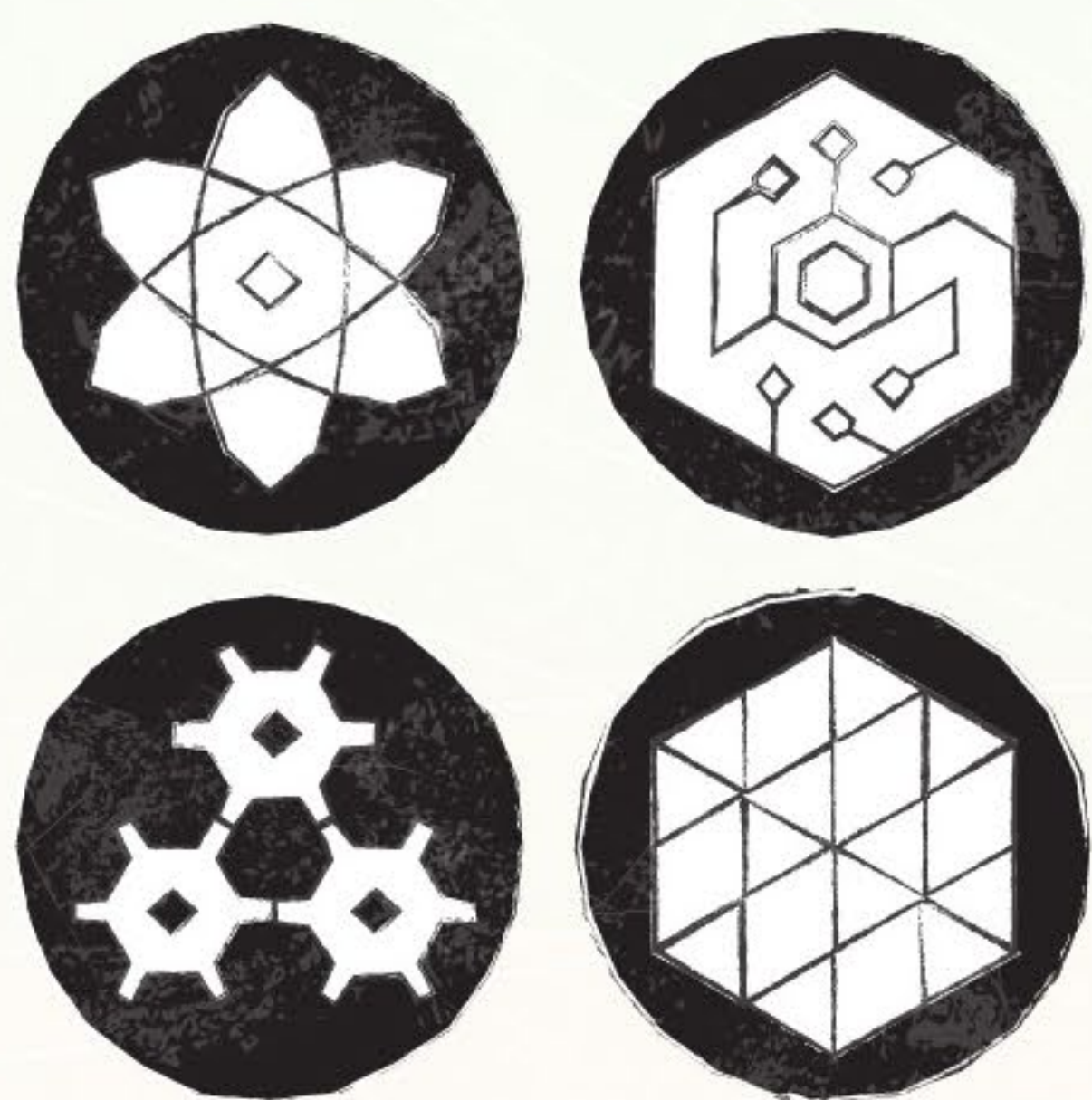




IMAGINE YOUR FUTURE IN **STEM**

College Transition, Achievement, and Further Educational
and Professional Advancement



Copyright © 2019 Pellet Media, Inc.



All rights reserved. Published in the United States
by the Stairway to STEM Foundation

www.stairwaytostem.org

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: The Stairway to STEM Foundation

Title: Imagine Your Future in STEM: College Transition,
Achievement, and Further Educational and Professional Advancement

Shares tips, resources, and best practices for autistic students
and their support communities around the transition to college,
academic success, and professional advancement.

Description: First Edition. Boston, MA :
The Stairway to STEM Foundation, 2019

ISBN-13: 978-0-578-50445-2

Subjects: autism, autistic students, college transition, self-advocacy, academic success,
higher education, accessibility and inclusion, disability services, workforce preparation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	i
A Note on the Resources	iii
Section I: College Transition	iv
STS PILLAR CONTENT: The Danger of Pursuing Independence as a Goal for Autistic Young Adults	1
Insights for Autistic Students and Their Families About Developing Self-Advocacy Skills: Two Studies on Emerging Adulthood	4
Junior Year: Five Things Students on the Spectrum Should Do to Prepare for College	8
Senior Year: Seven Effect Tactics Students on the Spectrum Should Use to Prepare for College	10
Navigating the College Application Process for Autistic Students (Without Sacrificing Your Mental Health)	12
Autism and STEM: Am I Ready for the College Experience? What Are My Goals?	14
Autistic and Transitioning to College? What Students and Families Need to Know	18
STS PILLAR CONTENT: The Academic World: An Introduction for Families	19
Section II: Achievement	v
STS PILLAR CONTENT: Mental, Physical, and Emotional Well-being	25
Tips for Autistic Students: How to Prepare for the First Day of the Semester	28
Transitioning to College: Four Things Autistic Students Can Expect from Intro STEM Classes	31
Three Assistive Technologies Autistic Students Should Know	33
Patrick Pontificates: An Autistic STEM Grad Student Says, "Go to Office Hours!"	36
Patrick Pontificates: Feel Free Not to Do Foolish Things – Even if Others Are Behaving Foolishly	38
Tips for Autistic Students: How to Make the Most of a Tutoring Session	40
Looking for Connections on Campus? Join a Club!	43
SECTION III: Educational and Professional Advancement	vi
STS PILLAR CONTENT: The Social World	47
Finding the Right Fit: Good Tech Internships Empower Autistic Students	50
Problem-Focused Coping: Autism and Preparing for Graduate School in Research Fields	54
On Mentorship, Lab Environments, and Job Applicant Disclosure: an Interview with Chemistry Professor Jen Heemstra	60
Socializing in STEM Classes and Careers: Part One, Insight for Autistic Students	63
Socializing in STEM Classes and Careers: Part Two, Practical Tips for Autistic Students	66
Autistic Professional Profiles: Quality Assurance Specialist, Aerospace Engineering & Manufacturing Company	69
Acknowledgments	73
What's Next	76



When we started planning the Imagine Your Future in STEM event in Bellevue, WA for May 2019, we understood that it was important to put together a take-home resource for attendees.

We know what it's like to experience a conference that motivates and inspires you, and perhaps leaves you feeling just a little bit overwhelmed. Where do you start in order to take the steps that will help you reach your goals?

This e-book pulls together some of our best content, delving deeply into outlooks, practices, and proactive steps that students and families can take to achieve goals:

- individualized transitions into college that support health, well-being, and academic growth
- increased confidence and ability for self-advocacy, social growth, and intrinsically motivated decision-making
- meaningful employment and advanced educational opportunities

There are real challenges and barriers to autistic student success, and this book works to redress that.

Each of our sections begins with what we call "pillar content," which are organizing pages that encapsulate key issues for the Stairway to STEM (STS) community and are written by Editorial Board Members.

When you go to STS, you'll see that all content on the site is connected to pillar pages.

Section One focuses on HS to college transition skills and what students and families should be working on to support college matriculation.

Section Two explores what it takes to be a successful student, including academic, social, and well-being skills.

Section Three is oriented toward preparing students for graduate study and workforce opportunities.

If you weren't able to attend Imagine Your Future in STEM @ Bellevue College, we've still got you covered. Video excerpts from the conference will be available on the STS

website, and each section here is packed with material that will help you reach your goals.

To that end, don't think of these sections as delineating hard-and-fast divisions. Content in the first section, for example, might support a job seeker who wants to put together a job-applications timeline, while reading the interviews in the last section could help first year students tailor their classes to fit their growing knowledge about STEM professional and workforce opportunities.

Also sign up for our mailing list to stay informed about new content and future events.

Most importantly, believe in yourself. We do, and this material reflects STS's conviction in the potential of autistic students. We're not only talking college and jobs, but meaningful opportunity for full, rewarding lives that are part of our vibrant and varied social fabric.

We are cheering you on as you prepare for next steps. It's important to remember (but so hard to really accept!), that progress, for all of us, is often not a linear process. We encourage you to persevere through tough spots and challenges, keeping an open mind. Where are you receiving the most encouragement and positive results? Is that a door opening?

Finally, we're always looking for and open to your feedback. If you have a chance to reach out after reading this material, we'd love to hear what you think. You can also start a discussion in the [forums](#).

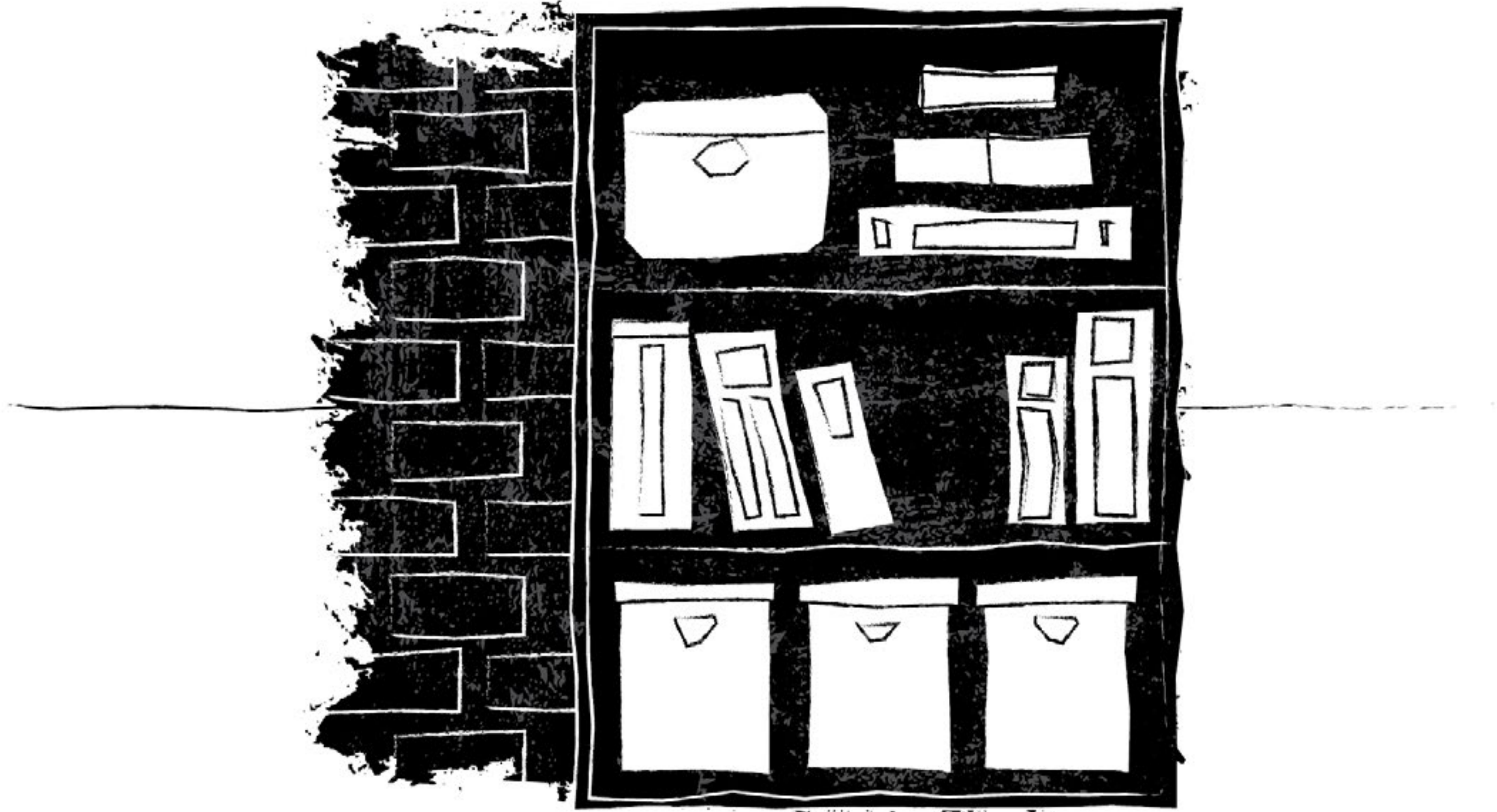
You can reach me at:

jmurray@stairwaytostem.org



Jessica Murray

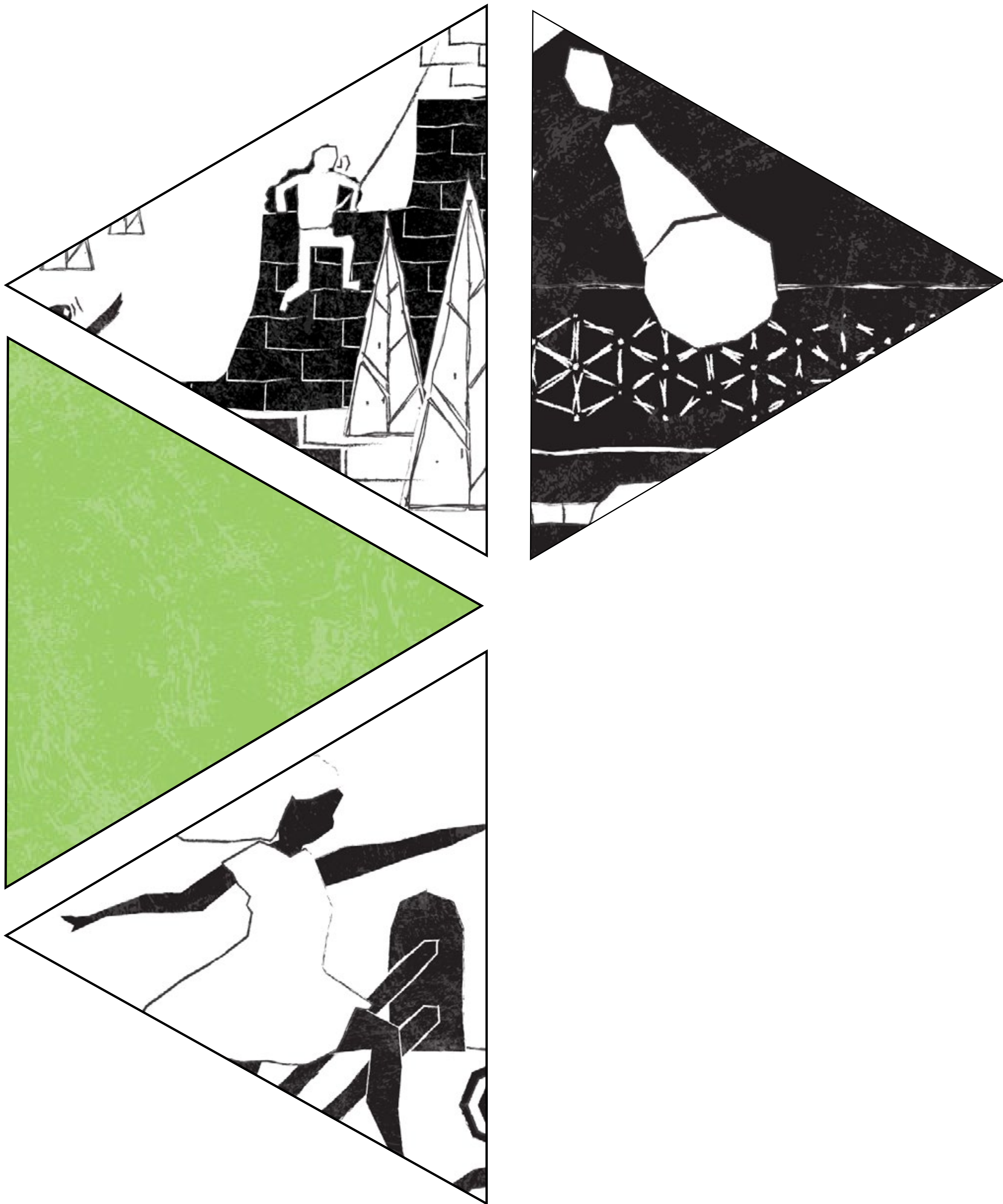
Stairway to STEM
Managing Editor



Most of our materials use the phrase “autistic student,” while some use “student on the spectrum” or a related variant. Whether to put identity first, as in autistic student, or person first, as in student with autism, is a significant debate in the autistic community. You can [learn more on STS here](#). In a nutshell, our contributors who have autism diagnoses employ the language constructions they prefer, and the great majority prefer identity first.

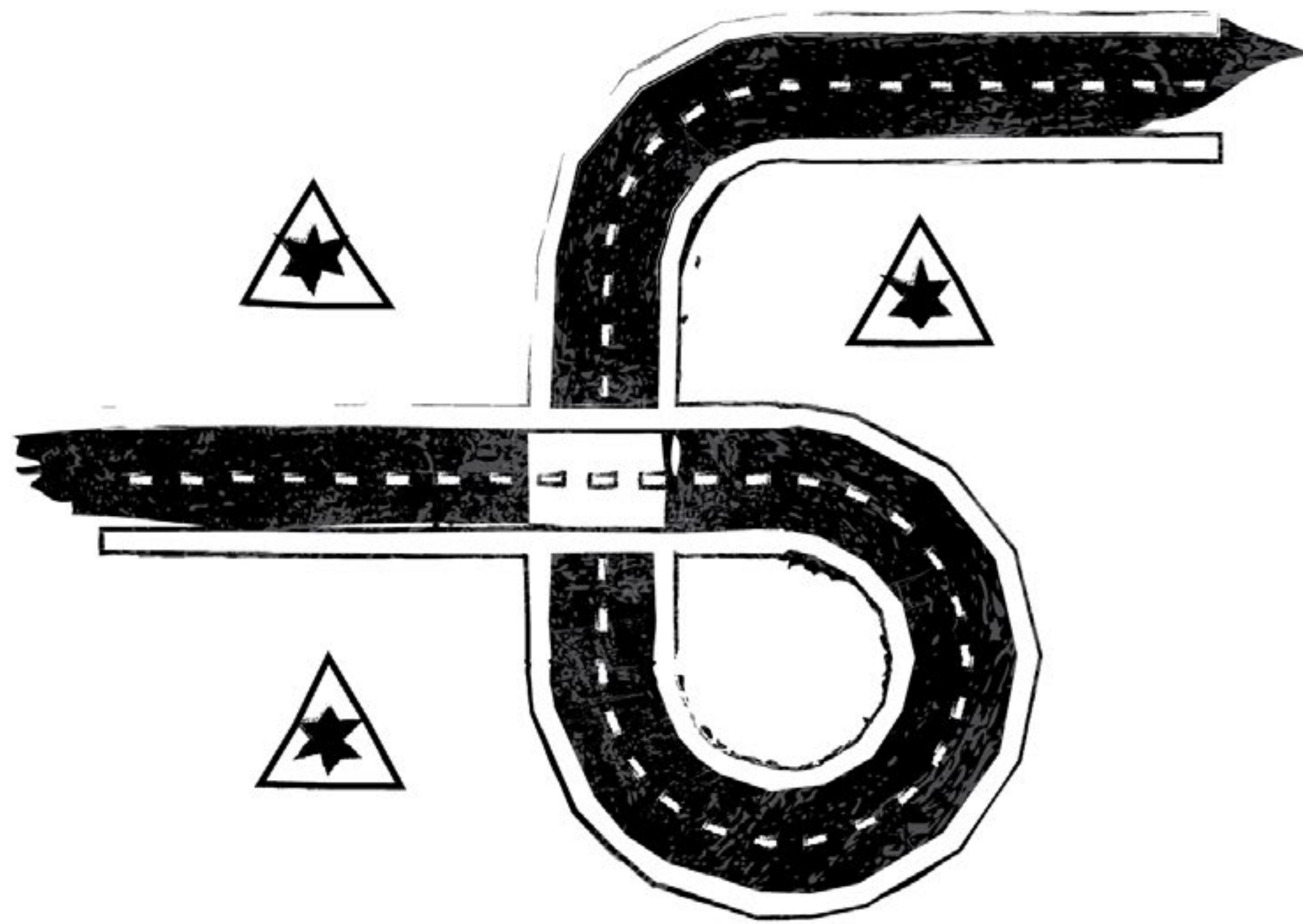
Additionally, where posts reference other posts, we have generally chosen to leave the references, even if it is to material not included in this book, in order to alert readers to related material accessible on STS.

SECTION I: COLLEGE TRANSITION



If we had to pare down all the advice we hear from students and families on the other side of successful college transitions, it would be this: start early, scaffold, and understand that each autistic student's path is unique. To that end, we approach the college transition from a framework of interdependence and creating understanding around college environments and expectations, with students and families working together to build important skills for success. If you didn't or aren't able to do everything on our time lines, that's okay. Use them as guides that give you insight and clarity around the type of actions that support a positive transition. As one of our contributors says in an absolutely terrific [video](#) included here, "college is major, major change, right?" Finally, we close this section with another one of our core pillars, which provides an overview for families and students of the academic world. Are you ready? Let's do this!





The Danger of Pursuing Independence as a Goal for Autistic Young Adults

by Sara Sanders Gardner

Independence is touted as the gold standard of adulthood, and not often questioned as such. In fact, it's unlikely that you've ever heard someone say, *"I don't want my child to become independent!"* A quick internet search will return thousands of articles on how to teach your teen or adult disabled child how to become independent, or live independently, along with checklists of all the skills they need to master prior to reaching that ultimate goal that marks them as a "true adult."

Setting aside that autism is a developmental delay, and the timing considerations regarding skills acquisition that are often ignored in pursuit of keeping up with typical peers, the question remains: Is independence a goal to be pursued at all?

Before delving into that question, please indulge a story or two. At age 20, as an undiagnosed autistic college student, I left home

for the first time to live in a college dorm. I was spectacularly unprepared, although not really in the area of "independent living skills." I could do my laundry, keep clean, find food, and even communicate with roommates, more or less. What I couldn't do was figure out why I couldn't use the bathroom there, and needed to drive home 90 miles every weekend in order to do so. And no, I certainly didn't tell anyone about it! My parents thought I was coming home to do laundry.

For the things I didn't know, I called my mom. I remember one day I defrosted some hamburger meat, and it smelled odd. I called Mom. She told me, *"When in doubt, throw it out."* So, I did. I called my mom quite a bit over the years, every day in fact, until she died when I was 47 years old. She was never able to teach me all the things I needed to know before I moved out of the house for good at age 26, and the phone was the next best

thing. I often wonder what it would have been like if she had known I was disabled. If I would have been better prepared, or less prepared. More or less anxious. More or less willing to call for help.

Because, words matter. They matter to me, and, in autistic culture, they matter to us. The dictionary definition of independence is: freedom from the control, influence, support, aid, or the like, of others.

What if my mom had been pushing me to be independent? What if I thought I was supposed to do it all on my own? And, although I certainly wanted to be free of my parents' control, would they really want me to be free of their influence, their support, their aid? Would I?

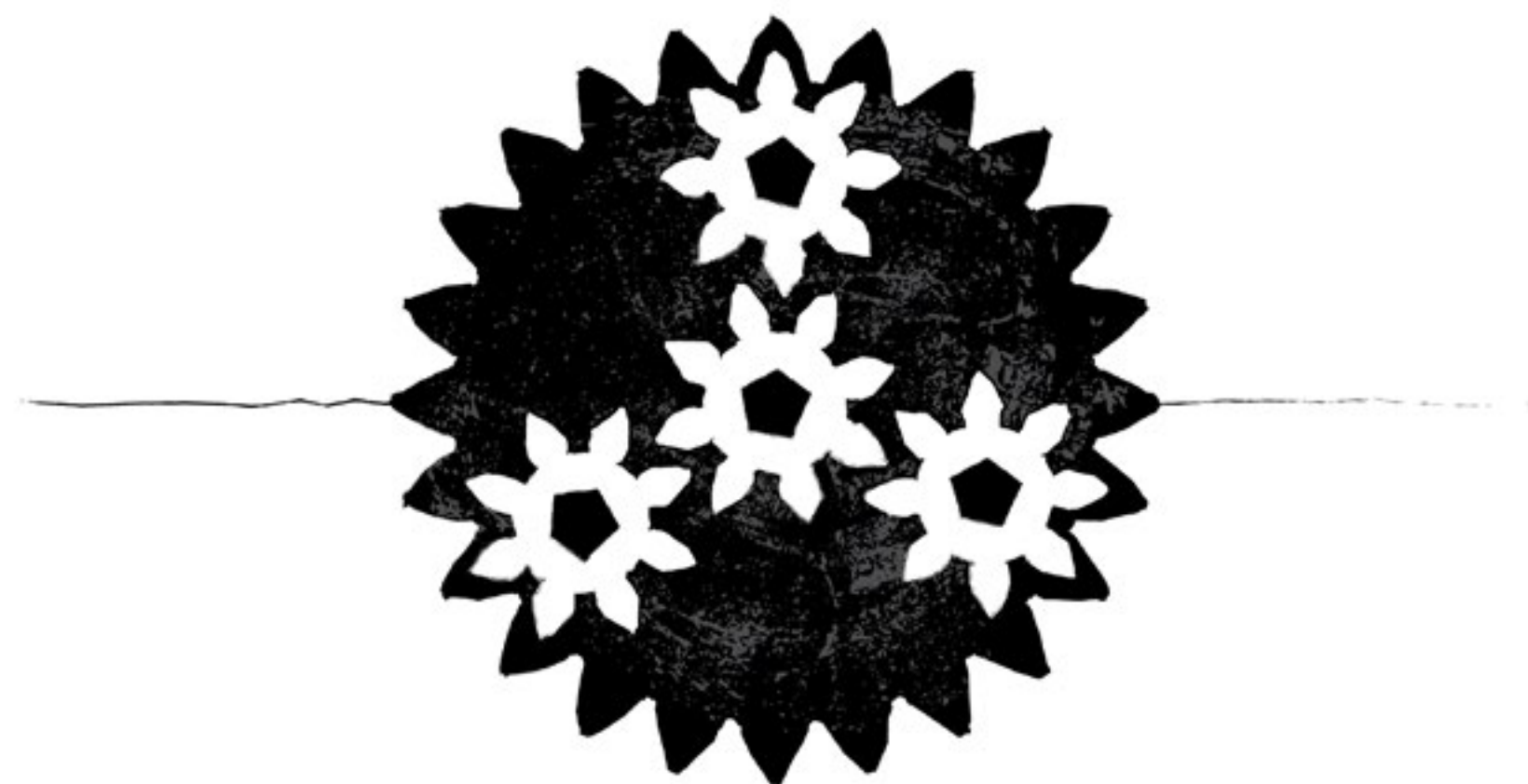
As I started raising my own son, and he earned his own autism diagnosis, I began to realize how important it was to let him know that we are a team, and that further, there are other people in the world that he can rely on as well. That people are here to help each other, and he needs to know how to identify them, and work with them. And that telling him that he needs to be independent could possibly jeopardize that goal – the goal of interdependence.

One day, when he was about 20, I said to my son, about some perceived skill I thought he needed to have before he could live on his own, *"You'll need to learn how to do that before you can be independent!"* And, he started to cry. He said, *"You don't think I'll ever be able to live on my own. You think I'll never learn enough to take care of myself."* That stopped me cold. I knew I was

sending him the wrong message with those words pushing towards skill development, pushing towards independence, pushing him to do more. I immediately said to him, *"No. You could live by yourself **right now**. You don't need any of those things to live alone. You already know how to ask for help when you need it. You would be fine on your own. I'm so sorry I gave you the wrong impression. I believe in you."*

Because the definition of interdependence is: the quality or condition of being interdependent, or mutually reliant on each other. Stop and think about it for a moment. That's what we want for our autistic adult children, isn't it? For them to have mutually reliant relationships? With us? And with others?

As I was building the [Autism Spectrum Navigators](#) program at Bellevue College, a wonderful young man named Ben gave me that same advice. He wrote to me and said,



"My suggestion for parents is to rethink 'living independently' into 'living mostly independently,' and to break that down into smaller and quantifiable goals. Not even NT's live completely independently all the time, and yet that's what many people with AS think their parents are expecting. Placing arbitrary and unrealistic deadlines by

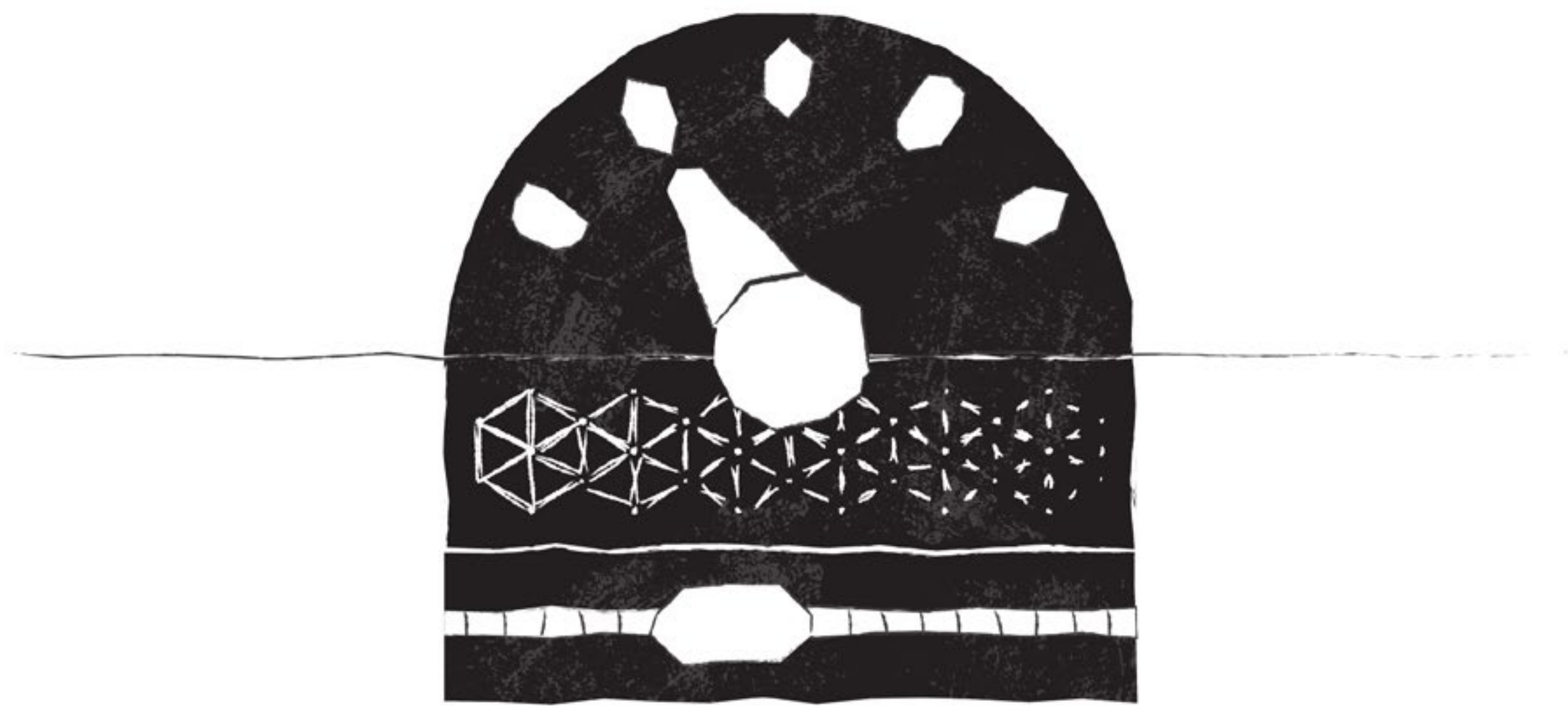
saying things like “Your father and I are going to do everything we can to make you independent by the time you graduate from high school” creates a lot of extra stress and anxiety, and causes a 20, 25, or 30-year-old who still lives at home to feel like a failure (I moved out when I was 26). Even the 29-year-old from Square Pegs who lives at home has made progress toward becoming more independent, but it dashes his confidence and hope every time his dad says something like, “You’re 29, when are you going to finally get your own place?” rather than saying, “You’ve improved this, this, and this, and I’d like to help you improve more on this, how can we do that? Any ideas?”

When we consider interdependence, and what it means, we quickly realize that no one is truly independent. Think through your day: did you make your own coffee? Cut and / or color your own hair? Change the windshield wipers or rotate the tires on your own car? Deliver flowers to your mom for her birthday yourself? Clean your house? Mow your lawn? If you’re anything like me, the list of things you didn’t do all by yourself is much longer than the list of things that you did! And, even if you are a fiercely independent type, you will likely have to admit that there are just some things

you don’t do for yourself. Grow or raise your own food? Generate your own electricity? If you live in Oregon – pump your own gasoline?

In the classroom one day, going over these terms with a group of freshman college students, I jokingly said, “No one is completely independent. Well, except for maybe Tom Hanks on the island in the movie *Castaway*.” To which my students immediately replied, “No, he wasn’t independent – he had Wilson!” Even on a deserted island, we need other people. Teach interdependence to your autistic children, teens, and young adults, and watch them turn to others when they need help and support. If you need something to help you remember, you can get a Wilson volleyball, just like the one I have on my office shelf.

Have questions or comments about Interdependence? Pillar content doesn’t have a comments section, but you can connect with our team and STS community members in the [Interdependence Forum](#).



Insights for Autistic Students and Their Families About Developing Self-Advocacy Skills: Two Studies on Emerging Adulthood

by Katie Matthews

How should students and parents navigate interdependence when their goal is self-advocacy and a successful college transition for the student? Traditional wisdom says that too much parental involvement or support is a bad thing for students' growth, but a couple of recent studies suggest it's not so much about the frequency of interaction, but the type and quality of interaction, and that can be good news for autistic students.

Study: "Parent Involvement: Investigating the Parent-Child Relationship in Millennial College Students"

Many neurotypical students rely on their parents throughout their college years for support and help with their studies (Pizzolato & Hicklen, 2011). Millennials (those born after 1982) and Generation Z (those born between 1995-2010) have parents who are more involved in their college experiences than ever before. However, we know that increasing independence during the emerging adulthood years is an important step in overall development. Pizzolato and Hicklen write:

For those adolescents considering matriculation into higher education, and for those college students enrolled in post secondary

institutions, the importance of such separation and decreased dependence is tied to an increased likelihood of persistence in school and achievement of desirable outcomes.¹ This is significant in highlighting that when students take ownership of their education and become more self sufficient, they are more invested in their schoolwork and are more likely to stay on the road to success.

At the same time, the study reveals the way that separation and decreased dependence don't necessarily mean a decrease in communication. For example, students might seek to develop independence via means of a "consultation" with their parents, either by speaking with them directly or even by imagining what parents might say about

an issue without actually engaging them. These kinds of interactions do not inhibit intellectual or social growth and, in fact, can contribute to it:

If students and parents can learn to interact in ways that support the development of healthy mutual relationships—in which both parties recognize and respect the other as fully functional, capable individuals—then the parent–child relationships may be able to push emerging adult children to develop epistemological orientations previously found to be rare in college students.²

In other words, it's not about the frequency of interaction, but the quality. In their study on the parent–child relationship in the context of important decision-making, Pizzolato and Hicklen found that almost half of the college student participants involved their parents in important decision making, but only 15% involved their parents on a consistent basis. This shows that while parents are still sought after for advice, college students are also successfully navigating the decision making process by using their own problem solving, turning to friends' advice, or seeking out other mentors within the school.



Study: “Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Their Parents in the Transition into Higher Education: Impact on Dynamics in the Parent-Child Relationship”

What do the findings of Pizzolato and Hicklen mean for neurodivergent students? Perhaps such findings can help alleviate some anxiety about what “independence” should look like, as well as help families focus on the kind of communication that best supports students’ self-knowledge, self-advocacy, and academic growth. Another recent study shows why attention to the type of communication can be an important step in developing self-advocacy skills in emerging adulthood.

According to a recent study (Van Hees et al., 2018), adolescents with autism and their parents were more concerned with the non-academic aspects of the college years than they were academic success. Many students in the study “expressed their need for ‘freedom’, ‘independence’, ‘autonomy’, ‘responsibility’, ‘fitting in’, and tied these concepts to roles they had to master successfully in order to construct—as one student called—the identity of ‘a legitimate college student.’” Unsurprisingly, the effort to construct this identity could be a source of anxiety and fear.

Autistic students in the study typically asked their parents for help choosing classes, thinking about career options, gathering documentation for in-class accommodations, and helping with the administrative side of transferring paperwork from high school to college – and continually sought out parents for emotional support. But many students who have autism still cited a reluctance to seek help and a desire for a higher level of independence from their parents and support services.

This perceived conflict between wanting to do more independently but still needing guidance can be a tricky path to navigate. The good news is that these articles show us that the real danger to independence or interdependence is when parents and students set up a dynamic that doesn't allow the student to grow in responsibility and self-advocacy:

Due to the emotional vulnerability of their children, their ASD-symptoms and difficulties to take the lead, parents experienced difficulties to handle their child's wish for independence. Fueled by their own experiences, parents felt inner resistance to promote and stimulate the autonomy of their child.⁴

In other words, families often found themselves struggling to encourage increased decision-making for the students, even if they understood the benefits of working on these skills.

Both mothers and fathers had lower expectations of autonomy for their children with autism than did parents with neurotypical children. This question of how to support students while encouraging them to take the lead in their college opportunities and preparation for full adulthood are challenging, but a couple of conclusions are clear:

- Like parents of neurotypical students, parents of children with autism still have an important influence on how their child will develop socially and independently as they mature.
- Students benefit from a loving home environment that is autonomy-supportive in order to develop into capable adults.

So, what can you do as a parent to act in "autonomy-supportive" ways? We're glad you asked!

You can support developmental processes in an independence-focused and communication-driven environment at home:

- Help explain the **why** behind decisions you're making. Weigh the pros and cons out loud and ask for your teen's input.
- Encourage your teen to research career or academic information on their own first. Then, meet together to discuss what they found.
- Allow for failure opportunities. Self esteem and coping skills grow from experiencing a disappointment or misstep and coming out okay in the end. By making a mistake and problem solving, a student can learn what to do differently next time, how to manage perceived-as-negative emotions like frustration and/or humiliation, and practice successful repairs or second attempts.
- Talk to your teen about whether they want to disclose their autism diagnosis to peers on campus. Many students report a desire to participate in activities without their diagnosis predefining them because they felt that they would better fit in with the neuro typical students on campus. However, we now know that disclosing a diagnosis often brings significant resources to the table. If a student seems highly reluctant to disclose their autism diagnosis to anyone, speak to them about all the positive aspects of their personality and learning style, or encourage them

to speak to a therapist who can help navigate these confusing emotions.

- Help your teen develop a clear and accurate understanding of their autism diagnosis, along with their particular strengths and challenges. As they seek to develop a new social identity in college, they will be doing so knowing where they might need to seek further support.

- Problem solve what can be done first before calling home or turning to parents for support. Make a list of who or what resources can help in certain situations that your teen can reference later.

According to the Interactive Autism Network, some parents and students found that having a support person or mentor in the student's academic setting helped serve as a first line of questioning when support was sought.

- Talk about peer involvement and encourage social and academic collaboration. If needed, explicitly discuss what is expected in various social situations and commitments such as group projects, campus extra curricular activities, or relationships.
- Ask yourself: "With which task does my teen need the most support around?" If you can identify an area of need, you can start backing off the support given and systematically. Also, talk to your teen about what areas they believe they need the most support with. Being able to accurately identify personal strengths and weaknesses is an important foundation of independence.

- Start the planning process early. Begin talking about transitional skills such as money management, independent living tasks, time management, and self-advocating while your teen is still in high school, so they have practice becoming increasingly independent in these areas.

How do you encourage independence in your college-aged teen with autism? What have you found to be the best courses of communication? [Let us know in the comments.](#)

¹Pizzolato, J. and Hicklen, S. "Parent Involvement: Investigating the Parent-Child Relationship in Millennial College Students," *Journal of College Student Development*, 52, no. 6 (2011): 671-686. Accessed November 5, 2018. doi.org/10.1353/csd.2011.0081.

²*Ibid.*

³Van Hees, V., Roeyers, H. & De Mol. "Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Their Parents in the Transition into Higher Education: Impact on Dynamics in the Parent-Child Relationship." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* (2018) 48: 3296-3310. doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3593-y

⁴*Ibid.*

References:

[Interactive Autism Community](#)

[STEM Perceptions: Student and Parent Study: Parents and Students Weigh in on How to Inspire the Next Generation of Doctors, Scientists, Software Developers and Engineers](#)

Antony, P. J., & Shore, S. M. (2015). *College for students with disabilities we do belong*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Sax L.J., Wartman K.L. (2010). Studying the Impact of Parental Involvement on College Student Development: A Review and Agenda for Research. In: Smart J. (eds) *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*. Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research, vol 25. Springer, Dordrecht.



Junior Year: Five Things Students on the Spectrum Should Do to Prepare for College

by Kate Becker

Application deadlines. Test deadlines. Financial aid deadlines. The path to college is riddled with dates and cutoffs. But there's another important "unpublished" calendar—the one that helps students and families prepare, practically and emotionally, for the start of college. There's no one right way to do it, but here are some key moments along the way that can help all students reflect, prepare, and plan for the transition to college.

Junior Year

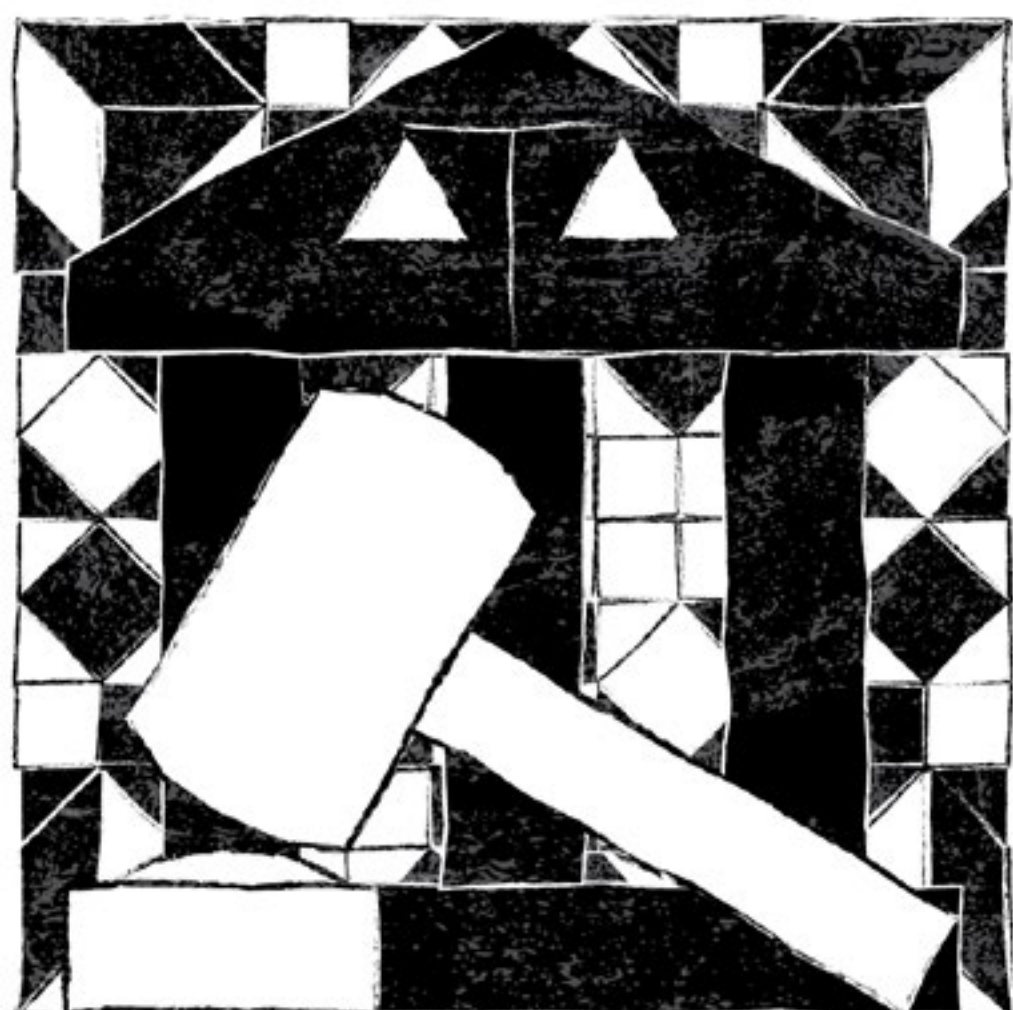
- **Think about your goals:** *"The transition to college really starts with the decision to go to college in the first place,"* says Lorraine Wolf, [Director of Disability Services at Boston University](#) and author, with Jane Thierfeld Brown and G. Ruth Kukiela Bork, of [Students with Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for College Personnel](#). Some questions to consider: Why do you want to go to college? What

academic, professional, and social skills are you hoping to develop? Is a four-year college, a two-year program, or technical certificate the right fit? Having clear and realistic goals will prepare you for the next steps.

- **Practice talking about your disability:** Know the name of your disability but, more importantly, understand your strengths and weaknesses and the kinds of accommodations and support that help you thrive. Practice talking about these things in a comfortable environment, like with a high school counselor or your family, so that you'll be ready when it's time to take that conversation to college.
- **Research colleges:** In addition to all the usual questions students and their families ask when they start looking for colleges (Can we afford it? Will I be accepted? Do I like the location? Does it offer the classes I'm interested in?), ask the Office of Disability Services about their

experience working with students on the spectrum. What services and accommodations are typically offered to students like you? Are there required courses that can't be or modified? What's their graduation rate for autistic students? And, though it might be tougher to answer, ask how students on the spectrum seem to fit in on campus—the answer might be illuminating.

- **Practice sustainable coping strategies for anxiety:** Sometimes strategies that work in high school, like pacing the halls or retreating to a counselor's office, aren't acceptable or available in the college environment, says Theresa Revans-McMenimon, a Counselor/Specialist for Students with Autism at [Westchester Community College](#) in New York and STS Editorial Board Member. *"Often I suggest to the student to record the class so if they do need to leave, the recording will pick up any part of the lecture they may be missing,"* she says. For students who anticipate such a need, Revans-McMenimon also recommends picking a seat near the door and identifying a nearby lounge area as safe "home base."



- **Read up on the Americans with Disabilities Act:** This is the law that protects your access to education after high school, and it's different from IDEA, the law that entitles students to special education services in public k-12 schools. Maybe you benefited from an adjusted curriculum in high school; that won't happen in college, though you may still qualify for accommodations like extended exam time. Plus, in college, you are responsible for reaching out to the appropriate student service program yourself: it won't happen automatically. Good resources: the [Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund](#) and the [Pennsylvania Department of Education](#).

Taking these steps doesn't necessarily mean you'll avoid all the drama and uncertainty around applying to colleges and other post-secondary educational opportunities, but it can help. And if you're a senior who is feeling behind, don't panic. There's still time to do the important work represented in these steps to help you make the most informed, productive decisions for your future!

Are you going through the process of preparing for college right now? What additional steps are you taking? What are some of the other helpful tips you've learned? [We'd love to hear about them in the comments!](#)



Senior Year: Seven Effect Tactics Students on the Spectrum Should Use to Prepare for College

by Kate Becker

Hey! Congratulations, you did it! You are officially enrolled in a certificate course, community college, or four-year institution, and you're nervous and excited for the future—just like all of the other new students. As you wrap up your senior year and look ahead to the fall semester, here are a few steps that you can take to help reduce uncertainty and anxiety.

Senior Year

- **Take a campus tour:** Visit the campus and practice finding key locations, like classroom buildings, the library, cafeteria, and Disabilities Services Office. You might visit again during the summer, but it's a good idea to go at least once when classes are in session, so you'll know what it feels like when it's busy with students, faculty, and staff.

- **Talk with your parents about [FERPA](#):** In high school, your parents may have taken an active role in your academic life, staying in touch with your teachers and counselors via regular calls, emails, or meetings. In college, that changes, both because it's a natural time for you to take on more independence, and because a federal privacy law called Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) means your academic record is sealed, unless you sign a waiver giving your parents access (and, waiving FERPA is not an option at all colleges, so be sure to investigate your college's policy well in advance of starting classes). Talk with your parents about what role they may be taking in your college academic life and consider whether you will choose to give them access to your academic records.

The Summer Before College Starts

- **Practice getting to campus:** Especially if you'll be taking public transportation, it helps to do a few dry runs. If you haven't done it on your own before, practice using a fare card or ticket. Figure out how long it will take you to get from your door to class—one less thing to be anxious about on your first day.
- **Don't make any big changes:** *"The summer before college is not a time to go off any medications,"* says Lorraine Wolf, Director of [Disability Services at Boston University](#). *"It's a 'stay the course' time."* Make a plan to reevaluate at the end of the semester, when you have had a chance to adjust to college life.
- **Look into student activities:** If you're hoping to get involved in on-campus activities, do some research before classes start. Consider emailing the students, staff, or faculty who lead clubs or organizations you're most interested in. It will make showing up to that first meeting just a little bit easier.



first-day jitters and will also set you up to get to class comfortably early so that you can get a good seat. And even though you might feel the gravitational pull of the seats in the way, way back, Revans-McMenimon suggests grabbing a spot right in front. *"You're more likely to participate when you're in front of the room,"* she says, and it will actually make the class seem smaller, since you won't be staring at the backs of 30—or 300—heads.

- **Remember that anxiety is normal—for everyone:** Wherever you fall on the spectrum, it's common to feel overwhelmed, lonely, or intimidated by the early days of college. Remind yourself that, despite appearances, your classmates probably have their own anxieties—and that there will be people on campus to help you find your way.

The Week Before Class Starts

- **Practice finding your classrooms:** Don't stop your campus tour at the door of the classroom building. Head inside and find every classroom, recommends Theresa Revans-McMenimon, a Counselor/Specialist for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders at [Westchester Community College](#) in New York and STS Editorial Board Member. It will minimize

Taking these steps will help you feel confident and in control of your experience.

Are you going through the process of preparing for college right now? What additional steps are you taking? What are some of the other helpful tips you've learned? [Join us in the comments.](#)



Navigating the College Application Process for Autistic Students (Without Sacrificing Your Mental Health)

by Abi Hunter

When I was seventeen years old, like millions of other high school seniors around the country, I started my college applications. I was lucky enough to attend a private high school on scholarship, one with vast resources to support students getting ready for postsecondary study. I had an assigned counselor and attended school-sponsored workshops on essay-drafting. I had worksheets that told me how to order my extracurriculars on the Common Application.

The process was still awful.

I applied Early Action to my top school, an Ivy League, and was deferred. When more results started coming in, in early March, I got rejection after rejection. My mental health got worse. I had made the mistake, over those past six months, of making my self-worth entirely a function of my results. I spiraled, started spending hours out of class crying on counselors' couches, and eventually wound up seeing a psychiatrist, who diagnosed me with depression and

prescribed me 20mg a day of Prozac.

After crying and procrastinating and researching my options extensively, I made a decision that I was satisfied with. It wasn't ideal financially. Then, I got off the waitlist at one of my top choices, did the math, and made a deposit. I still wasn't all that happy. What I'd done, for six months, for four years, really, was base my self-esteem and self-love entirely on how I came out of this process, and that was the worst mistake I could have made. So even when, in the end, my final result was fine—great, even—the dozen rejection letters I'd received still haunted me.

What I would do differently, more than anything, is focus on things that I loved. I thought that the college process, at the time, was something I loved, because in addition to the other mistakes I had made, I let it turn into a special interest. I remember being slumped over, horizontal, on my psychiatrist's couch and having him ask,

"What do you enjoy doing?"

"Nothing!" I said.

"I'm diagnosing you with dysthymia," he responded. "It's a kind of depression that is less severe but longer-lasting than clinical depression."

There were definitely things that I'd enjoyed doing before August of the previous year, but I had subordinated them to my all-consuming obsession with college applications. I read books, read articles, crunched statistics, and spent hours on Naviance comparing my SAT scores to others who had applied to my top-choice schools. My conclusion was that I should have tons of choices, even if I got rejected from some of the more difficult schools. When my hypothesis turned out to be devastatingly wrong, I went into crisis. There is nothing hopeless about the process of applying to colleges, but if you let it take over your life, it cannot and will not end well.

I would rather I had paid much less attention to the process and focused on reading books, preparing for my senior project, and studying for my AP comparative government exam instead. Politics was something I loved immensely when I was seventeen but, again, when it came time to focus on applications, I simply let my interest fall away.

The most important, most helpful advice that I can give any autistic student about to start this process is: don't let it become a special interest. If you feel things starting to tend that way, do your best to tamp it down. Even if you have to take breaks from working on your applications, if you're not missing any deadlines, take those breaks. Set aside time for your

passions, for your special interests and the things that give you immense joy. Instead of thinking about where you're going to college, think about what you'll do there: no matter where you go, whether it's a local community college, a state university, or a private university, there will be fun clubs for people who share your interests, interesting classes taught by passionate professors, and dozens if not hundreds of choices for your major. If you know you're interested in STEM but not sure where exactly you would like to cultivate an interest, check out some books from the library. Watch YouTube and Khan Academy videos on topics you're curious about. If you know precisely what you want to do, focus more on your love for the topic than emotionally committing yourself to one university or another by falling in love with certain classes or degree programs. You will have so much time for that later.

Some people will tell you that you won't have any time to focus on yourself during your senior year. The truth is that this is the time it's essential to focus on yourself, what you really want, and what you really love. Most importantly, don't be afraid to ask for help, to say that you're struggling if things get hard. Use the resources at your high school or in your community, and talk to the adults in your life about how this process is going. The outcome of the college admissions process will impact your life, of course, but the one thing it cannot do is destroy it, and that is an incredibly powerful thing to remind yourself of.

Do you have questions or comments about your own applications process? [Let me know in the comments!](#)



Autism and STEM: Am I Ready for the College Experience? What Are My Goals?

by Elinore Alms

In this post, STEM college student Elinore Alms leads you through important considerations about how to assess your interests and goals in order to find the best academic and professional fit for your future. It can be easy to get so caught up thinking about college that you forget to really stop and assess your strengths, challenges, and current goals. This post will help ensure you're making strategic decisions that set you up for success from the get-go.

Major and Career Considerations for Your Person-centered Plan

Every prospective college student takes some time to reflect on their readiness before finally starting school. Most students are already thinking about what major they plan on declaring (usually no later than junior year in college). This can be a real dilemma—college-age teens usually don't have enough experience to be passionate about a particular subject. Some people find that it's easier to examine with a top-down approach. First, we will introduce strategies for building a support system, and then go into considerations for occupational goals. After answering these questions for yourself, do you think you're suited to college, trade school, or another path? Is

there a major or career type that sticks out to you? Do you have enough support, or are you going to need to connect with new people? These are all good thoughts to bring up to your parents and school counselors.

What is Person-centered Planning?

Robust support systems provide care and assistance to all types of people every day. Without our social systems, we would be unable to perform the complex tasks required to keep the world powered and people satiated. No teen could go to college if we did not first find several construction workers to build a room, several teachers to guide students, several authors to assemble complex and thoughtful textbooks, and so on.

Person-Centered Planning (PCP) is a group of processes designed to help disabled persons reach their full potential in the context of our society and with an emphasis on the “focus person.” It is widely regarded as a tool for self-advocacy and has successfully eased the transition to adulthood for many autistic adolescents.

There are five major steps to PCP. First, the student and support team will come together to establish their roles. They will develop a profile of the student including history, medical needs, critical relationships, etc. The quality of life of the focus person is assessed, and their preferences are added to the profile as well. Then, it’s time to figure out goals, obstacles, and strategies for overcoming those obstacles.

When the profile and goals are completed, the plan may be put into action. The focus person and support members should take note of any unforeseen challenges. All members must be committed to meeting regularly to address these challenges. Effective support members continue to listen to the focus person and edit the plan accordingly.

For more information on PCP, please refer to Cornell University’s Person-Centered Planning Education Site. Support members should be people who are close to the situation and/or have expertise in a specific area; some resources you can reach out to for additional support include College Autism Network and The Arc, two advocacy and vocational training services for autistic and otherwise disabled adults.

Motivations and Needs

Motivations are reasons people do things. “Needs” are often associated with primal needs such as food and shelter, but everyone has different challenges and needs. Autistic students must define obvious needs, such as academic and transportation accommodations, but it is also beneficial to measure more nuanced needs such as independence and social living. Motivations help guide the plan to meet the needs of the focus person. For example, if a student feels that career stability and low stress are very important to their success, and if they strongly desire a career that helps people, they may find fulfilling work as a nutritionist or audiologist. The same may not be true for someone with similar needs but lower sociability; they may be more comfortable aiming for a computer technology or engineering career. The following considerations may fall under the “motivation” or “need” categories according to the focus person’s individual traits and desires.

Social Living in College



Some students strongly desire new friends while others come to college expecting to get through the work without much fuss. How interested are you in having a social life during college? The number of units you take will likely impact this issue. A part-time student may have enough time on their hands but too little class time to actually meet new people, while a student taking too many credits may find themselves so busy with homework that they don’t

have time for friends. A student uninterested in social living in college may not mind either scenario, but a student who is looking to find friends will want to have a balanced schedule.

Sociability in Careers



How sociable do you envision your career being? Could you work with a subset of people, such as children, college grads, or seniors living with dementia? Education, healthcare, and research are all great pathways to working with people. If you're not so keen on the idea, there are plenty of jobs with minimal social contact: forestry, animal and plant life biology, and computer technology, for example. In fact, probably around half of all STEM careers don't require working directly with clients, patients, etc.

Supervision

It's nice to avoid working with patients and students if that's not your prerogative, but good luck getting away from supervisors! They are everywhere that freelancers are not; most people who have ever made money have made at least some of it under the guidance of a supervisor. A good supervisor will do exactly that: guide their employees to be the best they can be in the workplace. They can be wonderful mentors, even if criticism might hurt initially. It's extremely

beneficial to work under a supervisor to begin with, but if you're really looking to be at the top of the chain then you will want to find a career that doesn't require a lot of supervision after mastery or a service/craft you can market and produce by yourself, like freelancing HVAC or electrical technicians.

Independence

How independent do you see yourself being? This is a big variable and will tie into your plan because you need to know where you will live and how much money, time, and energy you will need to expend. If you plan on living with family after college, for example, you may not have to fret too much about finances and can pursue a lofty or passionate goal. If you plan on living independently, you may want to target a reasonable job title with positive projected growth, good pay rates, and high job security.

Career Stability

As previously mentioned, stability is important for independence and should be taken into account during the planning process. How important is it to you and your plan to work regularly, pay bills, and have money left over for leisurely activities? Some jobs are in high demand and boast great stability and benefits, such as clinician titles, and others are more risky. The jobs mentioned in the "Supervision" section do not have high stability and often do not come with benefits, so balancing stability and supervision preferences can be a challenge. Make sure to take the challenge head-on and identify your priorities before you get deep into an education plan that might not suit you.

Finances



Paying bills really isn't the top reason for most people trying to get an education, but it must register somewhere on the priority list. This ties

back into independence because the amount of money you need will be directly influenced by how much of your own living costs you will be paying. Are you expecting to have disability income? Will you always live with your parents, or do you expect to rent an apartment someday? Are your hobbies costly, like video gaming, or cheaper, like crocheting?

Passion

Chances are, you already have a special interest. It might be a great motivator, so find out if it or something related will suit your needs! There are all kinds of jobs out there, and making connections through peers and instructors who share your same interests is an opportunity you may not want to pass up.

Advancement

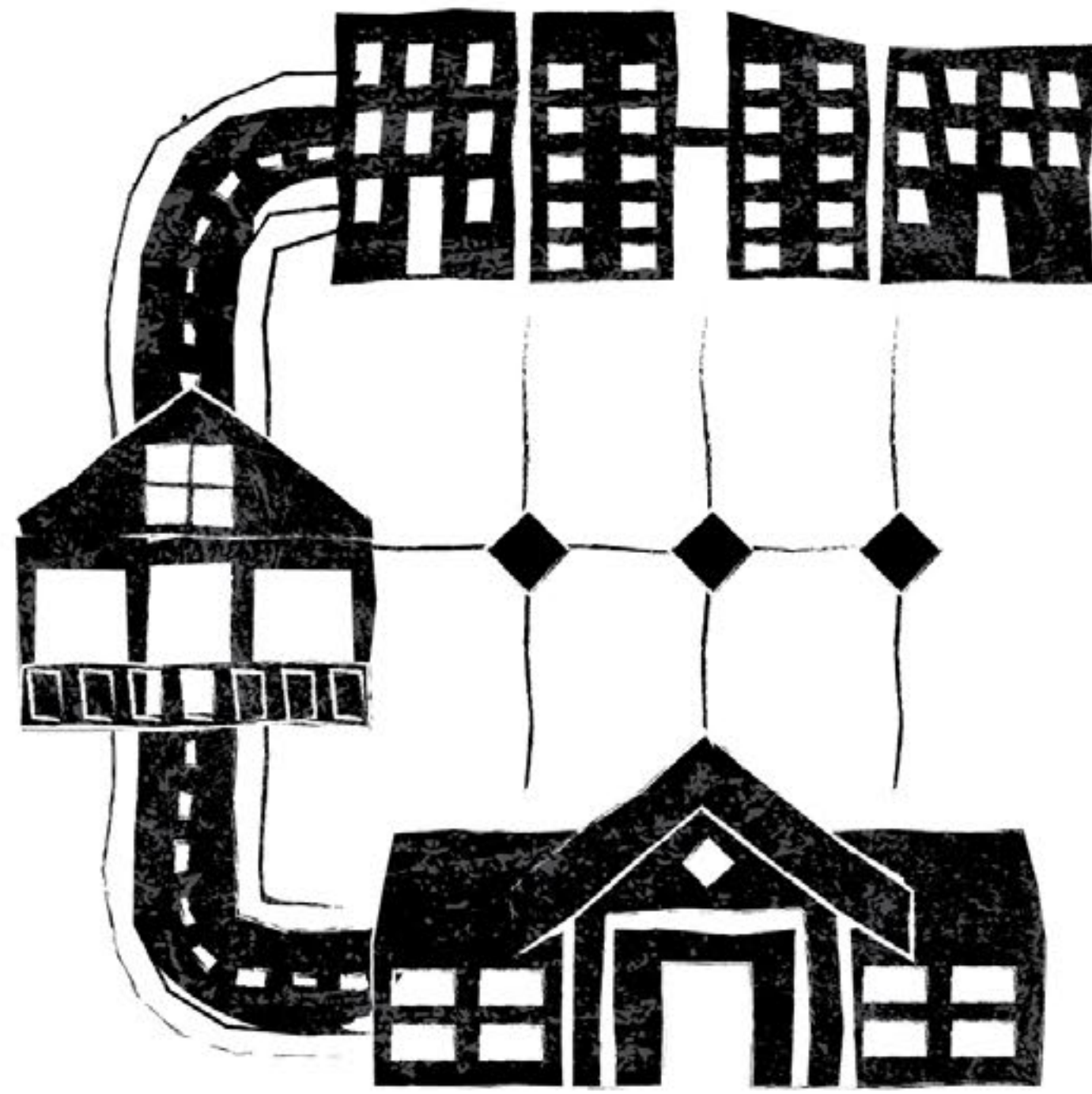
Are you interested in moving through the ranks, or do you plan on staying in one position indefinitely? Some careers have more room for advancement, like business management and medical careers. Others have less room: for example, niched non-medical professions like a factory machine mechanic, and those with wide reach but relatively few levels, like city planning.

Variety

Are you trying to make new discoveries in a chosen field? Are you more interested in a comfortable and stable lifestyle? Research in all STEM fields is booming, but you can't be sure that your project will continue to have adequate funding and you may find yourself looking for work from time to time. There are plenty of STEM careers that provide a steady flow of work, like data analysis.

I hope this list is helpful and that you are able to pinpoint interesting, fulfilling careers that meet your needs. For the most recent employment and wage statistics in the U.S., check the Bureau of Labor Statistics website.

Do you have more questions? [Let me know your thoughts in the comments.](#)



Autistic and Transitioning to College? What Students and Families Need to Know

by Patrick Dwyer

Autistic STEM Graduate student Patrick Dwyer had a successful high-school-to-college transition outcome because he and his family set high expectations for his achievements. Patrick strategically pursued a scaffolded or supported independence, including beginning his academic career while living at home and attending a local community college. Additionally, Patrick identified challenges that would be difficult for him once supports available in high school were no longer there, and he actively worked at improving these areas. A successful college transition is about so much more than academic capabilities--self advocacy and internal motivation, among other skills, are equally if not more important.

<https://youtu.be/efS8zzuRYBo>

Patrick has some great blogs on how to organize your academic schedule, choose classes, and take advantage of professor's office hours. Be sure to check them out on STS, and you can [leave comments on this video here](#).



The Academic World: An Introduction for Families

by Susan Woods

The academic world for students on the autism spectrum has unique and important elements. Families will want to explore and understand these elements as students get ready to embark on the journey of higher education. Understanding the academic experience involves knowledge and clarification of the legal and logistical processes as well as the differences between high school and college settings. Preparedness may help parents and family members provide the support and guidance that autistic students need to be successful.

SOME KEY AREAS TO GUIDE THIS KNOWLEDGE ARE:

- 1. The applicable laws and policies for accommodations in higher education**
- 2. Disability documentation requirements to receive accommodations in higher education**
- 3. Typical academic accommodations in higher education**
- 4. Communication policies and applicable privacy laws in higher education**
- 5. Selecting the best-suited academic environment**
- 6. Preparing for academic demands**

Laws Governing Accommodations in Higher Education:

The high school IEP/504 plan provided under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) entitles or guarantees services and accommodations to students with disabilities and may include remediation and modifications to core curriculum. In higher education (college and universities), the applicable laws are the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. These federal laws protect students from discrimination and provide equal access, but they have different objectives than the K-12 protection under IDEA. Some examples of differences are:

- Students must self-disclose their disability and request accommodations. An IEP is not recognized and may only be referred to as supplemental information to the primary documentation of the disability.
- Students are responsible for providing their own evaluations and documentation when requesting accommodations.
- Fundamental modification of core and program requirements or academic standards are typically not provided as an accommodation.
- Personal services (1:1 aide, personal care attendant, in class coaches) are typically not provided.

Disability Documentation Requirements to Receive Accommodations in Higher Education:

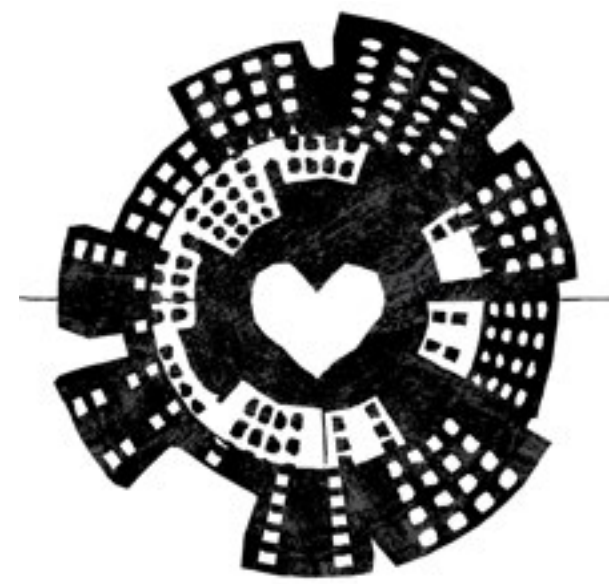
The college or university Disability Services website* typically details the process and the documentation guidelines. Accepted national best practices include guidelines and a process that outlines the current functioning and limitations according to the ADA, and supports the need for accommodations or other requested services. Documentation should be:

- From a medical or other qualified or credentialed professional, unrelated to the student, whose credentials match the disability being evaluated
- Clear and contain a specific diagnostic statement
- Sufficiently comprehensive to establish specific evidence of a substantial impact on one or more major life activities
- Detailed and offer a historically-relevant description of prior accommodations and mitigating measures
- Recent enough to assess the current impact and functional limitations posed in a post-secondary academic setting

***Note:** *there is variation in what the “office” or department that provides accommodations at a college or university may be called or how it’s identified on the website. Most often, the office is located within a Student Life, Wellness, or Student Support Services area. Some common department names are: Disability Support Services, Office of Disability Services, Services for Students with*

Disabilities, Disability Resource Center, Access Center, and Accommodations Center. It may require a bit of searching to locate the correct office on some college or university websites.

Typical Academic Accommodations in Higher Education:



Accommodations are intended to mitigate the impact of their disability on the student's academic performance, essentially to "level the playing field." Also, accommodations may be requested relating to the student's needs in residential settings (such as a private or single room in student housing). Typical academic accommodations* for a student (based on their individual disability documentation) may include:

- Extended time for tests and exams
- Distraction-reduced area for testing
- Note-takers, preferential seating
- Accessible facilities and equipment
- Assistive Technologies
(e.g. Kurzweil, Read and Write Gold)

***Note:** Some colleges and universities also offer "specialized support" in addition to required accommodations. Sometimes this is a fee-based service. Federal law does not require specialized support, but it is worth exploring. Many community colleges provide specialized support at no additional fee. This may include: tutoring and strategies focused on metacognitive approaches to learning,

study skills, organization skills, time management, test-taking strategies, course selection, and advocacy.

Examples of accommodations that are typically not supported in most higher education settings include:

- Personal aides or coaches for academics or housing
- 1:1 assistance for coursework
- Changes to or modifications of course content, adjustment of academic expectations
- Alternative assignments, course or assignment waivers, adjustment of behavioral expectations

Accommodations will generally not lower academic standards, water down curricula or compromise academic integrity, substantially change any essential elements of the curriculum or academic program, or ensure that all students with disabilities are successful.

Rather, accommodations provide **access**. The student is given the opportunity to determine their own level of success.

Communication Policies and Applicable Privacy Law in Higher Education:

Communication is subject to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ([FERPA](#)) requirements. Parents have no access to student's records (grades, reports) without written consent from the student. Faculty do not engage in a dialogue with parents.

Once a student has met with the Disability Services staff and developed an accommodation plan, typically the process then develops according to the student's preferences and requests. For example, most colleges and universities provide the accommodation plan (a letter or a form) directly to the student, who then shares it with their faculty. In some instances, the Disability Office may email the accommodation form or letter to the faculty (especially for online or distance learning courses). The key point is: it is **up to the student**. Accommodations are not provided retroactively.

The student is considered an adult by the college or university. As such, they have full access to their own educational and medical records. When the student provides these records to the college or university, **only** qualified staff in the Disability Services Office will have access to them. They are not shared with Admissions, academic faculty or any other department in the institution. The Disability Services Office takes this responsibility very seriously and will maintain rigorous measures to ensure the security and confidentiality of records provided by the student as part of the documentation process. Disability-related information provided to the college or university is considered an educational record; therefore, it falls under the protection of FERPA.

There is some variation of practice around communication. Some campuses have a strict interpretation of FERPA that advises staff and faculty not to speak to a student's parents without the student's written consent

(except in severe emergencies where health and safety may be at risk). In many instances, if the student expresses that they would like a parent to participate in the intake interview and meetings to establish and evaluate their accommodations, the office will invite the parent(s) to sit in on that meeting. What will likely not be supported is a parent having direct contact with a student's faculty. In some instances, a student may request a meeting with a faculty member and ask to bring a parent with them. Families are encouraged to help their student develop and practice self-advocacy skills.

Selecting The Best Suited Academic Environment:

Many factors are involved with the college search process. Certainly for students on the autism spectrum, these decisions may need to be made with more deliberate focus and analysis to consider the student's unique needs and find the best fit. Keep in mind that students in this process may be at varying stages in their general development. The "perfect fit" may be right at one point in time and subsequently change with the student's development and maturation process. There are a few starting points to guide this process, which are worth exploring in a deep and thorough way with the prospective student. Some questions to discuss:

- Who am I as a student?
- Why do I want to go to college?
- What are my strengths and what are areas where I may struggle?

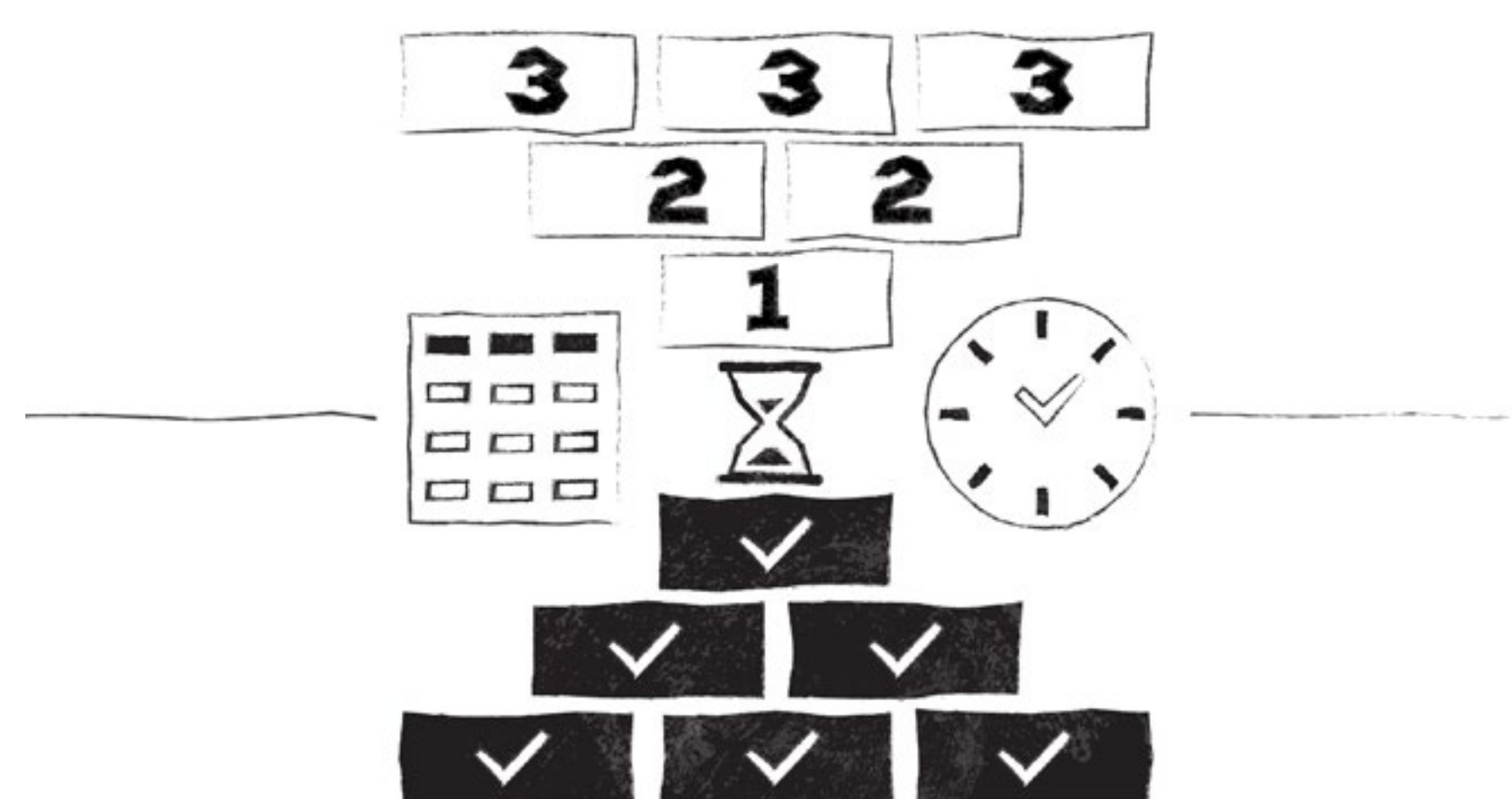
- What academic accommodations do I need and what do the accommodations do to help me to be successful?
- What other types of support do I need: social-emotional, physical, environmental and climate, distance from home?
- In what environment do I learn best? Big, little, medium? Noisy, quiet, urban, suburban, rural?

With respect to the admissions process, it is important to know that college admissions must be “disability blind.” This means that rejecting an applicant (who is otherwise qualified) solely based on disability disclosure is illegal, in accordance with the ADA. While students are considering the personal decision whether to disclose, here are some guiding thoughts to consider: What is the objective in disclosure? Will the application be considered differently in light of a “compelling story” or explanation that sheds light of some potential special circumstance that the HS transcript cannot detail? Are there gaps or inconsistencies in a student’s HS transcript that can be explained with disclosure? If considering disclosure in a college essay, will this be a major factor in the admission decisions? Can the disclosure be framed in a positive way, as in how the student’s achievements and contributions have developed as a result of conquering some of their challenges? Is their disability identity a part of themselves that they wish to share with the college or university? If an interview is part of the college or university admission process, will disclosure assist in framing some of their communication challenges? Again, this

is ultimately a personal and individual decision, but should be considered very carefully given this context.

And, finally, visit and tour the schools, surf their websites, talk to alumni and current students, meet the Disability Services Office staff members and get a “feel.” Then, ask your student whether they can picture themselves there. Choices, as well as risks, are part of their development. Also, keep in mind that no decision is set in stone.

Preparing for Academic Demands:



College-level work is intended to challenge and help the student grow academically as well as socially, civically, and personally. Colleges and universities establish institutional and content-area student learning outcomes that may involve a wide range of academic and co-curricular learning opportunities for students to develop and practice skills and abilities to prepare them for their future academic and career endeavors. These may include: Written and Oral Communication, Critical Thinking, Quantitative Literacy, Multicultural and Global Literacy, Social Responsibility and Personal and Professional Development. You may want to support your student in

the following ways as they prepare to meet these expectations and academic demands:

- Be realistic with respect to the course load, prerequisites and areas of strength.
- Begin to pare down some of the HS supports to help them become a more independent and resilient learner.
- Practice how to access resources and support services together.
- Practice communication strategies.
- Help your student to increase their level of responsibility and independence, perhaps using a scaffolded approach – mastering a step or stage before moving onto the next.
- Develop and practice accessing supports to help manage stress and academic demands.
- Encourage them not to “bite off too much.” A slower start with reduced course load, a balanced schedule, and level of course rigor may help your student to be successful.
- Applaud your student’s making at least one good and trusted connection (with an academic advisor, a professor, a counselor, a disability services staff member, a club advisor or others), which means they are more likely to establish a safety net to help them through any tough times.
- Help the student begin to identify and practice their own stress management support and techniques, as well as maintain their connections (via phone, Skype or continued treatment appointments) with an established mental health professional, counselor or pragmatics coach in their community who may support them in their transition to college.

What additional questions or concerns does your family have about the academic world and how to support your prospective college student in their transition? [Let us know in the forums for families.](#)

SECTION II: ACHIEVEMENT



If you read “Insights for Autistic Students and Their Families About Developing Self-Advocacy Skills: Two Studies on Emerging Adulthood” from Section I, you’ll know that most autistic students and their support networks are less concerned about navigating collegiate academics than handling executive functioning, everyday tasks, and social environments. To that end, this section begins with a grounding in mental, physical, and emotional well-being for college students, and it closes with perspective on why joining clubs and interest groups can be an important part of student growth and development. At the same time, we really wanted to think about what it means to be a successful student—one that gets the most out of the opportunities at hand and is working toward goals that require college learning but don’t end there. On STS, you’ll find a wealth of material about navigating the social world. Here we highlight things like assistive technology, interacting with professors, working with tutors, and contextualizing peer pressure. You can do the work. Learn how to make the work work for you.



Mental, Physical, and Emotional Well-being

by Theresa Revans-McMenimon

So you have graduated high school and are ready to begin college. Do you feel ready? Confident? Anxious? Excited? Scared? Ready to say good-bye to being “managed” and ready to say hello to “independence.” To be successful at this “adulting thing.” If you don’t feel ready, that’s ok. Not now, doesn’t mean not ever! No one is truly ready. Becoming an adult is a process. It is not something that happens overnight because you graduated or because you turned 18.

You probably have many questions like: *“how will I make friends, will there be other students ‘like me,’ and what do I do if I need help and become overwhelmed?”* Or maybe you’re thinking, *“My mom always reminded me of my homework assignments, how will I manage this now?”* or *“All this and I keep getting asked what I want to study and major in?”* This can really feel overwhelming.

The best piece of advice I can give you is to slow down.

College is about expanding your world and support network, increasing your self-reliance, and exposing yourself to new and different ideas.

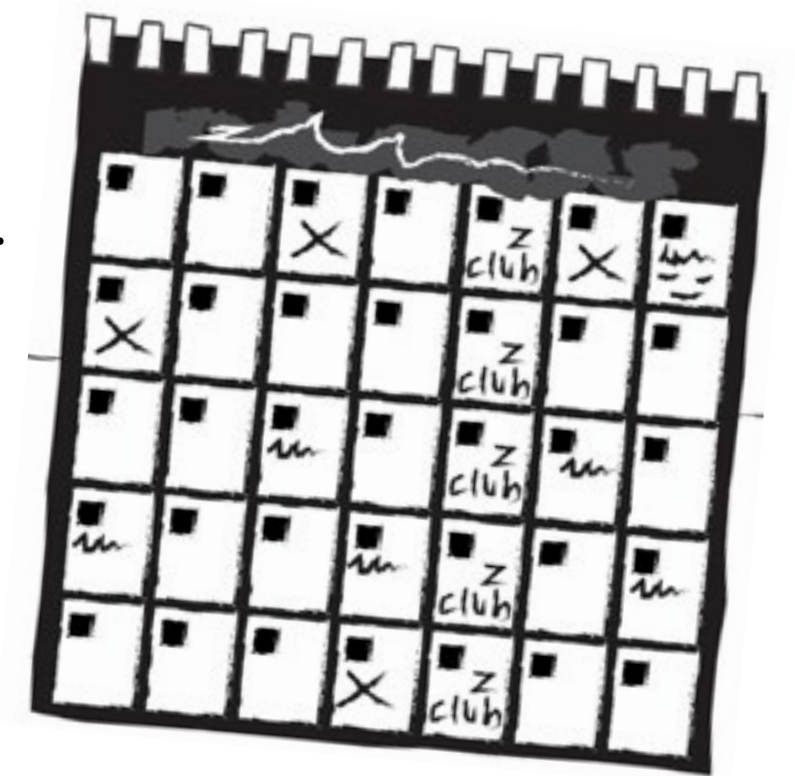
Before the semester begins, visit the campus and become familiar with the various offices that can assist you. Visit the Disability Services Office (DSO) to discuss your accommodations. Learn how the college can assist you with your success. Bring a copy of your disability documentation and be prepared to discuss the services you need and that are available. This would be a good time to ask about assistive technology, extended time policy, and basic policy and procedures for receiving your accommodations while in college. Up until this point, your accommodations have been protected under IDEA. As an adult, you are covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In order to protect you, this law will require you to disclose that you have a disability. This is one of the first adult decisions you will have to make—*“What do I disclose and who do I disclose it to?”* The DSO can assist you with this decision.

Next up, visit the Counseling Center. Learn if the college has personal counselors available. Starting college is exciting, but you may also be feeling some trepidation. That is to be expected. New experiences can make us nervous, but if you are distracted and having a difficult time focusing, then ask for help. A personal counselor is someone you can speak to if you are feeling overwhelmed or struggling with an emotional issue. If you are already engaged with a private therapist, find out how the personal counselor on campus can work together with you and your private therapist. You will need to find out their availability for individual meetings, if support groups are offered, and if any fees are incurred. If you are feeling overwhelmed or are struggling with a personal decision, this is the place to go to talk it over. Counselors are part of your expanding support network.

Academic Support. Most colleges offer academic support, which can be in the form of tutoring or workshops. Find out where the Academic Support Center is located and what their hours of operation are. You may have performed well academically in high school and never needed tutoring, but college coursework is different. Much of the work is independent of the classroom and requires more time management skills. Some support centers offer workshops on time management and study skills. They can help you to learn techniques to stay on track with your work. One great time management technique is to use your cell phone to program reminders and due dates. There will be times when you are receiving grades you did not expect. This can feel devastating, but poor grades will happen.

You are adjusting to different teaching styles and coursework assignments. The academic support that you can receive at college is invaluable and can help with your adjustment to these varying styles.

College is more than just about academics, though. It is about having fun and making new friends and memories. Joining clubs and activities on campus is a great way to start this process. Your student involvement office will host a club fair. This will give you an opportunity to see what clubs are available. Find a club that reflects your interests and show up to the meetings. Yes, it may be awkward at first, but remember that everyone else in the club has the same interest as well. This is a great starting point for conversation. For example, you could initiate a dialogue by asking, *"How long have you been interested in Anime?"* Remember to reciprocate in the conversation—focusing on the common interest will make this easier. Joining clubs will answer the question, *"Will there be others like me?"*



If you are half way through the semester and have not joined clubs or made a friend or two, reach out for assistance. The DSO is a good place to start. Talk over your feelings with the counselors in the DSO. They can then connect you with services and offices on campus. The student involvement office may be able to pair you up with a "buddy" or student leader that can help.

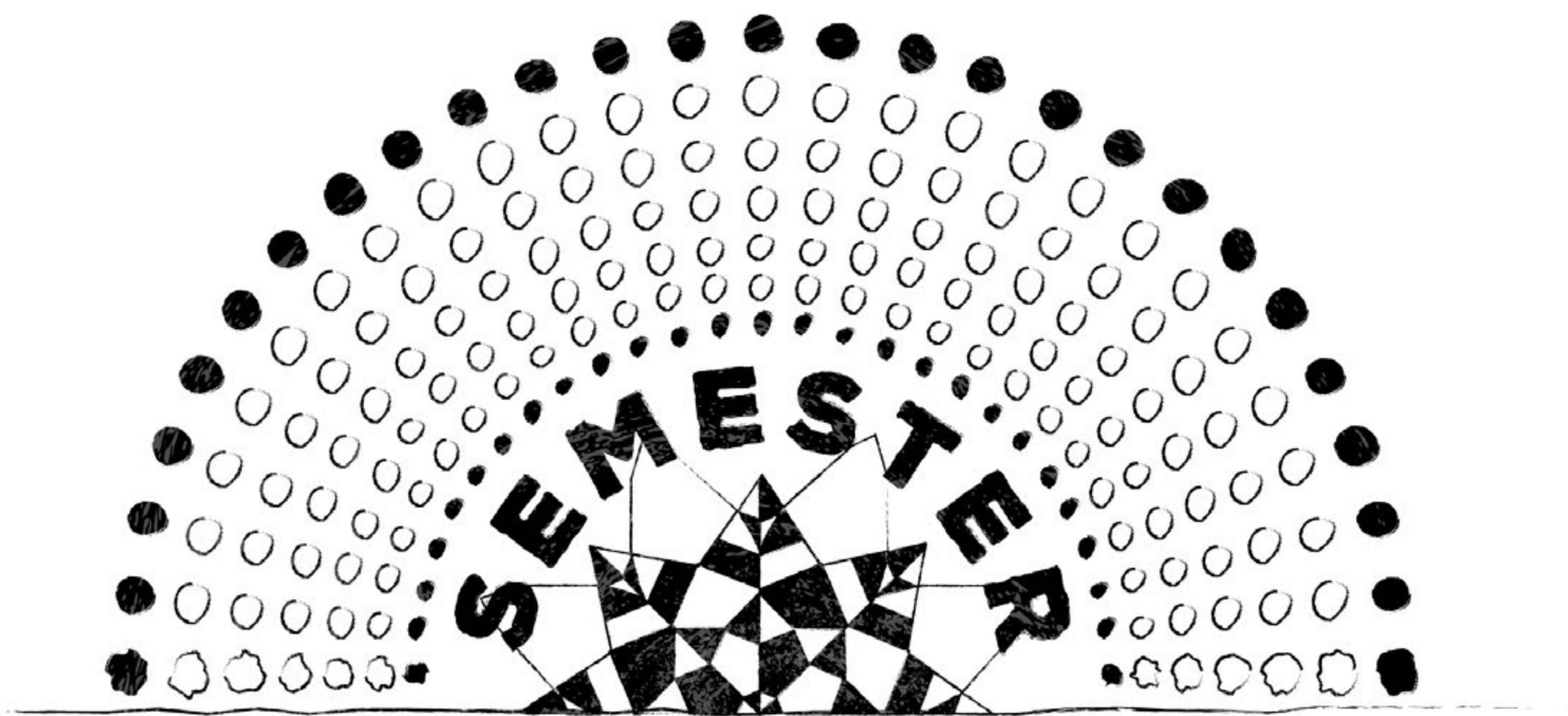


Your world will expand through the general education courses you take. You will take a class in a subject that is new to you or where a different perspective is taught. This is great and may spark a career interest for you. It can give you a platform to learn a new course of study. You do not have to decide on a major or a career at 18 years old. You probably have many interests and will change your mind several times. Once you have started college and have developed a rhythm, go to the career center and meet the staff. Find out if a career assessment is available for you. This may help to solidify your career goals.

Taking good care of you will lead to increased success. Eat well and exercise. If you take medication, use your phone to set up reminders for your medication regimen. Sleep is important, too. There may be several late nights studying, so catch up on your sleep when you can.

Transitioning to college is an exciting time. You will learn to become a self-advocate and to become more independent. Remember that your mental, physical, and emotional health is most important. If you need assistance, speak to your expanding support network on campus. Every staff member at college is ready and willing to assist you. You are not alone.

Have a question for our community about Mental, Physical, and Emotional Well-being?
[Start or join a discussion in the student forum.](#)



Tips for Autistic Students: How to Prepare for the First Day of the Semester

by Elinore Alms

College is an exciting time and for autistic students everywhere, it is rife with barriers before one even makes it to the first day of classes. However, with the help of family, friends, and mentors, many youths secure funds and move through the application process successfully. When the first day comes, it can bring a variety of emotions and complications. The good news is, there are ways to soften the impact of this radically new experience. I have personally used many of these strategies and wished I had used others - they are good tips for anyone who is anxious about beginning new classes.

The Month Before

Every college has a disability services center. It's important to make an appointment with disability services at least a month before school starts so you can tour and get in touch with other resources. This would be a good time to learn the procedure for getting accommodations you may need, such as assistive technology. For example, every

office at my college has a text device available, but one can only access it through an official accommodation.

Getting used to the school is essential for a successful first day. Most colleges and universities have standard orientation days, but the setting can be overwhelming. There are usually accommodations for disabilities, but it will also be helpful to visit multiple times and find classes.

- A close friend or family member will have an idea of your needs. Try to bring someone whom you can talk to and have a good time with while exploring your new campus!
- There are map boards around college campuses, but I find that having a printed map makes it easier to use the stars marking a position on a big board. Your campus most likely has a map online, but if you can't print it, the disability office and several other offices around campus can provide a copy.

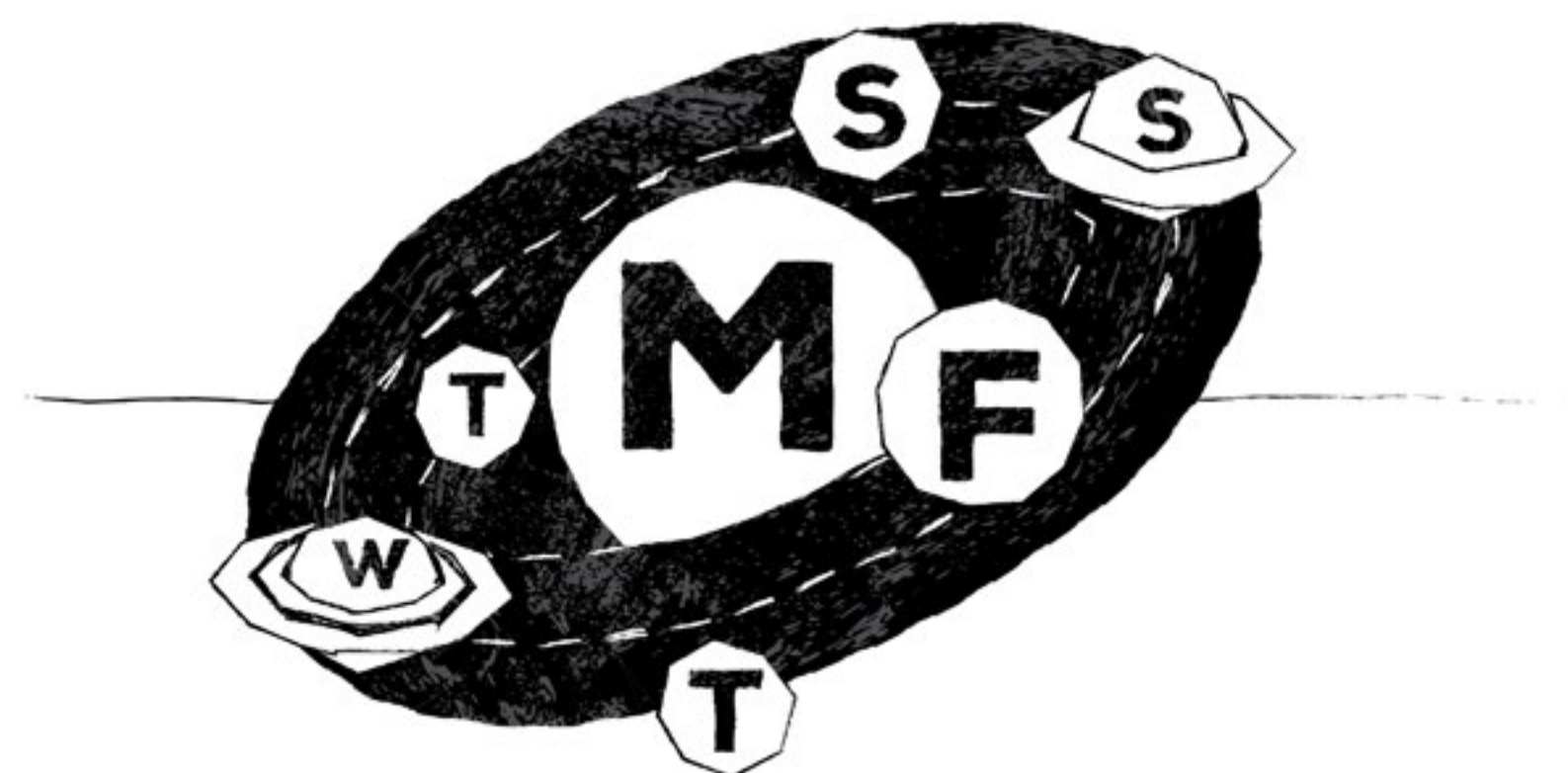
- Mark your class locations on your map, and then take a stroll around to visit each building. Campuses often have several gardens, statues, sculptures, murals, and other art on display. If this is something that interests you, take time to enjoy it while few people are about!

Touring campus is important, but I found transportation to be the absolute worst part. I biked until my bike was stolen, then I bussed for two years and I have never felt so antsy in my life. Never knowing if the bus would show up early or not at all, I thought there could be nothing worse. Though driving saves **so much time**, experiencing city highways and inner streets always seems like a gamble. When I began school, transportation was at the forefront of my mind as a barrier. Thankfully, there are some steps you can take to ease this part of the experience.

- Most counties have disability services for adults, including transportation to school and other locations. This may be one of the most valuable tools you can use, so be sure to ask about it and follow through. If you need help filling out the application or gathering necessary information, disability services can often help with that, too.
- Are you going to school from home, or straight from work? You should probably make a trip around at least once from each location. I discovered that there was a ton of construction being done all through my route, and I had to adjust it unexpectedly. This is easier done when you're not in a race to find parking.

- Buses are somewhat unpredictable, but if you have to use them and you know they can be late, be sure to catch an earlier bus. Participation is a few percentage points in most classes, which can make the difference between grades. Be sure to bring something entertaining. I hooked up a gaming controller to my phone and played old-school video games. Buses are often free or discounted for students.
- Cars are fast, but parking lot gridlock does not discriminate. With campuses increasing their student population every year, it's becoming impossible to meet the demand for parking spaces. My own college is experiencing this issue and I have parked a block or more away before. There are usually spots closer than that, especially if you have a disability placard, but either way, it's good to check out the neighboring areas and note the places you're allowed to park (and if they have time limits).

The Week Before



Read all the information you can find! Your teachers will open any online portals the day before or the day class begins, so you need to make sure you have your student email and portals set up. I was once blindsided by a weekly lab because

those hours were cut off on the computer screen, so I had to figure out how to free up an extra 4 hours per week. It's a great idea to check over the course description in the catalogue, where you can find times, dates, descriptions, and sometimes the needed supplies.

The First Day (and the First Week)

If you don't know where to go, this is a great opportunity to ask your supportive friend for help. Alternatively, you can go into any administrative office and ask the person at the desk for guidance to disability services or other locations. Disability services will be equipped to give you a calm area to take a break in or help with a difficult task.

Show up early... just in case. You never know which days and times are going to be busiest, and parking a car is a challenge. I've already mentioned how it's important for your grade to be on time, but it's not just about your GPA: instructors are **good people to know** when you're looking for a job, mentorship, and inspiration. College professors are intelligent and specialized; they're often friendly and willing to discuss their topic at length. If you want to get to know your professor, start it off on the right foot.

- If you do show up late, quietly enter and tune in to the lecture or activity as quickly as possible!
- After class, it's nice to make a **positive first impression** and say hello to your instructor.

- Ask a question or make a comment about the lecture or the subject of the class. Many nights last semester, I ended up spending the second half of labs chatting with my teacher after I completed the task. By the end of the class, I was quite sad to go.

Plan ahead. When classes are over for the day, spend some time relaxing to avoid the classic after-school meltdown. Temple Grandin's famous "[squeeze machine](#)" helped her relax before and after school. Though most people don't keep squeeze machines around, there are some pretty relaxing things you can have and do at home to relieve stress. Relaxation activities include kinetic sand (a personal favorite), indoor hammocks, weighted blankets, and of course, the good old-fashioned bath-time and a book. Whatever works for you, do it! You absolutely earned it!

I hope this list helps you get through the first week. Good luck on your new journey, and [let me know in the comments if you have any questions or want to share your own tips!](#)



Transitioning to College: Four Things Autistic Students Can Expect from Intro STEM Classes

by Justin Robbins

Although in college you will have a wide variety of courses to choose from, all STEM studies begin with an intro class. They are the sprout, the sapling, the part of a plant leaves connect to. From there, your options open up. These classes will also likely be among your first, as most other courses require you to have already taken these foundational classes. With that in mind, let's go over some of the things to expect when you start your college career in a STEM field.

The first thing you will likely notice is the size. Introduction classes (in all disciplines) are big, with several dozen and maybe several hundred students. There may be times where you discuss matters with your neighbors, but the primary format is lecture. The professor goes over their slides, and you take notes on them.

Now, why do you want to do that? Because you will need to use those notes you created to study. Most of your grade will be decided by 3-4 exams over the semester. Some

courses will have weekly online questions, but the homework assignment will always be to know the material and study for the next exam. Intro classes have the most homework out of any college courses (or at least the most structured); after that, you are given more autonomy.

You will have a reliable roadmap for that homework, though, in the form of the course syllabus. Another major change in college is that syllabi are much more precise. While in high school syllabi provided a general roadmap, for college STEM classes, they are an almost exact schedule of what will happen each day in class. They are a very reliable way of planning.

In the sciences, however, lecture won't be the only part of the course. You will likely have a separate laboratory component that will play a major role in your final overall grade for the course. Every week you will meet with a smaller group of students and a teaching assistant (an upperclassman or graduate

student) to get practical experience with the scientific process and concepts you are covering in lecture at that time. You will do the experiment with a partner or partners, following the given methodology, making observations and answering questions in your lab notebook. The grades for the lab component of the course are—not surprisingly—lab write-ups, which likely consist of doing the lab and answering questions about it, both before and after the experiment. While they are first and foremost methods of teaching, I found college labs to be much more interesting than high school labs. This was mainly because they supplement, not restate, the lecture material and what would happen was not a forgone conclusion.

The courses may be introductory, but they will not be easy. Indeed, I have heard allegations that these kinds of classes are designed with a higher than normal barrier to success. What is certain is that what is evaluated, in science courses at least, changes considerably from high school. In most cases, it's not the facts that count; it's what you do with them. Even in an introductory foundation course, raw knowledge only gets you so far. Understanding those facts and being able to apply them is what matters. Even multiple choice questions can require in-depth thought rather than recitation of notes.

This all might sound daunting in the abstract, but you will not be thrown into the deep end, so to speak. Professors have office hours, time where they set aside other duties to answer students' questions. Take advantage of this! The lectures are also made with the prioritization of application in mind; you will learn how to apply the knowledge just as you learn the knowledge itself. Are these classes difficult? Yes, but far from back-breaking. You can do it, and then the field is yours to explore.

Are you currently taking an introductory STEM class? What did I get right, what did I miss? If you're thinking ahead to college, [what other questions do you have about intro classes?](#)



Three Assistive Technologies Autistic Students Should Know

by Katie Matthews

Individuals who have an autism-spectrum diagnosis may have had experience using Assistive Technology (AT) and Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) as they progressed through the K-12 educational system.

AAC falls within the umbrella term of AT and is specific to communication. AAC either augments an individual's verbal communication if they have difficulty being understood or acts as an alternative means of communicating if they cannot use verbal productions. AAC devices are those which people may picture when thinking about Stephen Hawking, for example, or young children who use "talkers."

Assistive technology more generally refers to anything that can assist an individual's performance, and people who may not be candidates for AAC might certainly benefit from AT. AT includes complex supports such as laptops and iPads, but it also includes simple supports such as pencil grips,

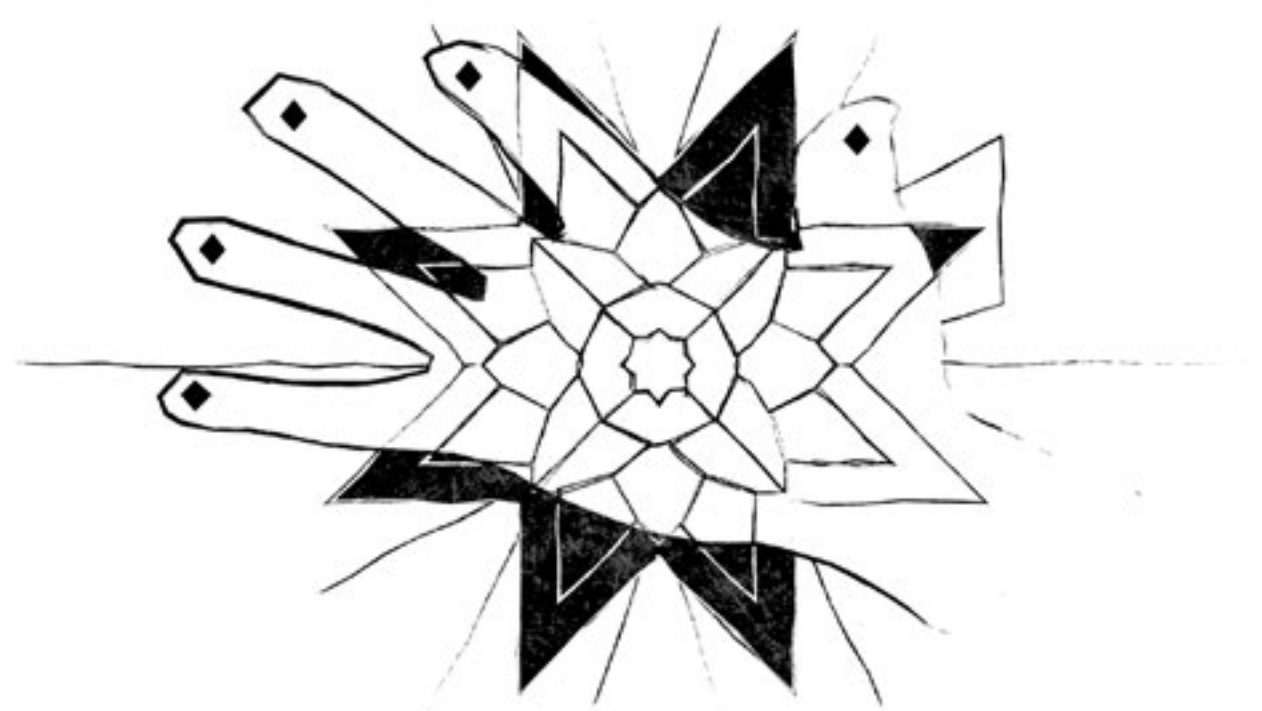
wide-ruled paper, slant boards for writing, and spell check. Common AT supports in the classroom include:

- speech-to-text technologies
- text-to-speech technologies
- frequency modulation (FM) systems for people who are hard of hearing or have attention difficulties
- access to a computer for typing
- access to computer applications for spelling support (word prediction, spelling suggestions, and grammar corrections)

Additionally, students often record their professor's lectures to listen to them again using the audio recorder available on their laptops so that they do not need to multitask—listening to the lecture, taking notes, processing, and asking questions all at once.

In high school, many 504 plans are written to include use of these supports in the public school setting. However, once at a higher education level, these supports can still be extremely helpful for a variety of reasons. Many students will find AT useful in completing assignments, taking notes, and for organizing their semesters. In fact, many individuals might already be using assistive technology without even thinking about it!

Some of my most recommended AT supports include:



Read & Write - This is a toolbar that can be added to your computer. It includes text-to-speech technology, dictionaries, speech-to-text technology (which can assist in proofreading and studying notes), word prediction, and technology to visually simplify pages of texts.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhPG8o-T5Rog&index=1&list=PLvSZbmGbKpCTZxm-R7X1CESsu3jpWcJTty->

There is a delay while this video loads, and the screen says the video is unavailable. However, as of publication, the video is available, but users who click through have to wait several seconds for the video to play.

***Note:** This is the first video in a series of 5

***Note:** Can do a 30-day trial before paying for a subscription

Voice Dream Reader - This is an app for the iPad. This technology helps turn written pages from textbooks, web pages, PDFs, or uploaded documents into pages read aloud with visual support. It is especially helpful in removing distractions from the screen and helping students focus on the text. One of my favorite parts about this app is that you can change the pace of reading, and also set timers to help organize study time.

<http://www.voicedream.com/reader/>

<http://www.voicedream.com/reader/reader-feature-list/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3xW-G1wvWEE>

Google Drive - Most students will be familiar with Google Drive as it is commonly used across many school systems. It is also a convenient and oftentimes preferred way to share files with peers in group projects and with professors/TAs. Within Google Docs there is spell check but no grammar support. You can search in the Google chrome web store and enable the extension called LanguageTool to access grammar support in Google Docs. There are other extension applications available, like Grammarly, which is specifically designed to help with writing and even includes a plagiarism detector.

- **Google Docs** has speech-to-text (go to tools -> voice typing)
- **Google Cal** can be set up to prioritize study times, keep track of assignments and test dates, and give you reminders for your to-do lists

While these are just a few of the technology supports available, don't be afraid to do some research, ask around, and find other applications that might help with certain areas of trouble in the classroom. New apps and computer programs are constantly being developed and improved on. If you're autistic, going to the Disabilities Services Office to utilize the resources available on campus can completely change your learning experience. The professionals in this department should also be able to help you figure out how and when to speak to a professor about using accommodations and which forms and documentation are required. Unlike in the public education system, the professors and school will not know you have used any accommodations in the past unless you tell them. If you need special permission to record lectures, use a laptop in class, and/or type handwritten assignments or tests, you will likely be best served going through the Disabilities Services Office, if possible.

If you don't have a formal diagnosis but would benefit from these technologies, you may be able to get permission from your professor or instructor, but that will likely require a formal conversation. Don't let that prospect prevent you from getting the support you need. You can advocate for yourself, and most professors will be willing to listen to your requests.

Have you benefited from using assistive technology in the classroom or to complete an assignment? What is your favorite assistive technology to use? This [video demonstration of assistive technology](#) is also really useful. [Please let me know your thoughts in the comments.](#)



Patrick Pontificates: An Autistic STEM Grad Student Says, "Go to Office Hours!"

by Patrick Dwyer

Greetings! Your very own sagacious, learned, twenty-four-year-old autistic grad student is here with more words of wisdom about succeeding in college.

Today, I want to talk about the dangerous beasts that prowl through college campuses. The common college instructor, *Tyrannoprofessor megacephalus*, is well-known to students as a source of fear. Many instructors subject their helpless students to dull, boring lectures. But the greatest danger may come from the bad grades that this creature has the power to assign. To many students, the college instructor is a dread figure, one of awesome power and terror. They fear to confront it in its own lair – to visit it in its office hours.

But fear not, for I am wise enough to know that the college instructor is a much-misunderstood creature. All instructors started out as students just like you, but seduced by their passionate interest in the subjects they now teach, they endured long years of graduate school, and perhaps even years of postdoctoral study, and metamorphosed into their

present forms. It is that deep passion for their subjects that is your salvation – most instructors appreciate students' interest and want to help students succeed.

Nor is it shameful to seek help at college. You know how Dumbledore in Harry Potter says, "Help is given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it?" I think that should be my new motto when writing about college, because help is given at college to those who ask for it. Moreover, I have a special secret to share with you: the students who ask for help aren't necessarily the students who are struggling. On the contrary, many of the students going to office hours are the keenest and brightest, the ones who want to turn their A- into an A. Going to office hours won't make you look dumb – quite the contrary! I mean, I'm usually not at all braggadocious, but the fact is that I was a very good student (you know, being very wise and all that), and I was in office hours quite a bit.



Furthermore, good preparation can help to tame *Tyrannoprofessor megacephalus*: to get the best out of office hours, it's often helpful to come with some specific purpose. That could mean simply introducing yourself and perhaps disclosing your autism diagnosis, and having a friendly discussion about ways in which your instructor could accommodate your learning style. Or you might have some specific questions about an area of the material you're struggling to understand. Or you might come to review your performance after an exam or assignment and discuss how you could improve your grade. Or you could come to discuss a topic for a term paper.

(Actually, if you ever have to write a term paper on a topic of your choice, it is a good idea to **always** discuss the topic and thesis with your instructor. They usually have excellent suggestions and advice.) You could even write down a list of questions for your instructor beforehand, perhaps working with a trusted person to develop your plan.

If you are having trouble understanding your instructor's explanations, you can usually just politely admit as much. Most will recognize that they can sometimes slip into jargon and will be happy to back up a little and try explaining things a different way.

There are also benefits to attending office hours that go beyond getting help with the course. Going to office hours is technically networking, but in a nice, structured, one-on-one way (not an overwhelming, big-social-event way). If an instructor remembers you, they'll find it much easier to give you a good reference letter if you ever need one. I've also

been able to get good advice about applying to graduate school from professors I met in office hours.

It's true that college instructors can be and look intimidating, and you might run into the occasional instructor who just isn't a good fit with you, but most can be an excellent source of advice. There is little to lose and much to be gained from occasionally dropping in on your instructors' office hours.

What experiences have you had with office hours? Were they helpful? Did you have bad experiences? Do you have strategies to get the most out of office hours? [Add your comments to the conversation!](#)

Appendix: If Regular Office Hours Aren't Possible

Sometimes, your schedule will not allow you to go to your instructor's office hours. That's fine. If you send a very polite and respectful email that respects [all the social conventions of writing emails to a college instructor](#), you'll probably be able to figure out an alternative time. Similarly, if you have an online class or if your instructor doesn't have listed office hours, you could send a polite email describing your problem and requesting help. If the matter is complicated enough that you would prefer to discuss it in person, you could try asking for a Skype meeting.

Furthermore, in addition to office hours, you might want to check to see if your campus offers free tutoring sessions. They can be very helpful, if you're able to secure a spot, and did I mention the bit about them being free?



Patrick Pontificates: Feel Free Not to Do Foolish Things – Even if Others Are Behaving Foolishly

by Patrick Dwyer

Greetings! 'Tis I, your so-far-successful autistic grad student, ready to reveal the mysteries of post-secondary life. (Or, at least, I'll get to the mysteries as soon as I'm finished indulging in grossly exaggerated arrogant melodrama as a humorous device.)

Now, where was I? Ah, yes, the mysteries of post-secondary life. Let me tell you a strange fact. Researchers (like Perkins, Haines, & Rice, 2005, or Perkins, 2007) have done some fascinating studies asking students about drinking in college. The researchers asked students how many alcoholic drinks they consumed at parties, allowing the researchers to get a sense of how many drinks students actually do have. But then the researchers also asked the students to say how many drinks they thought other students typically consumed. Strangely, the vast majority of students seemed to think that the average student had more drinks than the actual average. But how can that be – the average student obviously can't drink more than the average student, so what's actually going on?

Well, the researchers think that most students "misperceive the drinking norm": students often overestimate the typical rate of alcohol consumption in their college. Unfortunately, this only ends up amplifying peer pressure. The students who had the most exaggerated sense of the drinking norm were also the students who drank the most. The actual rate of drinking at the college seemed to have a smaller effect on students' drinking than students' perceptions about the rate of drinking!

When it comes down to it, peer pressure is in our heads. When we believe that it's normal to do something, we might feel pressure to do it. It doesn't matter whether it's actually normal or not.

Why I am I telling you this? Because I hope that this will give you more confidence if you're

reluctant to do something, but feeling pressured to do it anyway. There's a pretty good chance that the pressure you are feeling is illusory. Maybe the people who are pressuring you aren't representative examples of the student population – or maybe they're lying in the hopes of fitting in with their own misperceptions about what's normal.



Besides, if you don't want to do something, why do it? [I think we should always try to hang out with people who have similar interests and who make us feel comfortable](#) – we shouldn't feel pressured to change our ways in order to fit in.

Ultimately, what's so great about this notion of "normal" anyway? We're neurodivergent people, after all. Surely we want to be supporting a world where neurodiversity is accepted, where we can all feel free to be ourselves even if others are different.

Thus, we shouldn't feel that we have to do foolish things just because we see others around us being foolish. We can feel free to say no to foolishness.

This can apply well beyond the issue of college drinking. (I only focused on that because it's been so well-researched.) Maybe we see other people skipping lectures, blowing off studying, not writing essays until the last minute, doing drugs (other than alcohol, I mean), and so forth. We certainly shouldn't do anything that leaves us unsafe or allows other people to exploit us.

If you have a niggling worry that maybe something you're about to do is a terrible bad idea, maybe you should listen to that worry.

If you're already doing something that, on reflection, has proven to be a terrible bad idea, it's never too late to seek help. One great place to go might be your college's counseling services office.

By the way, here's a (rather frightening) sentence that sums up what decades of research have told us about excessive college drinking:

"Consequences of college drinking include missed classes and lower grades, injuries, sexual assaults, overdoses, memory blackouts, changes in brain function, lingering cognitive deficits, and death." ([White & Hingson, 2014](#))

Thus, there are many good reasons to think twice before we succumb to (perceived) pressure.

Any comments? Additional thoughts?
Relevant experiences? [Join the conversation!](#)

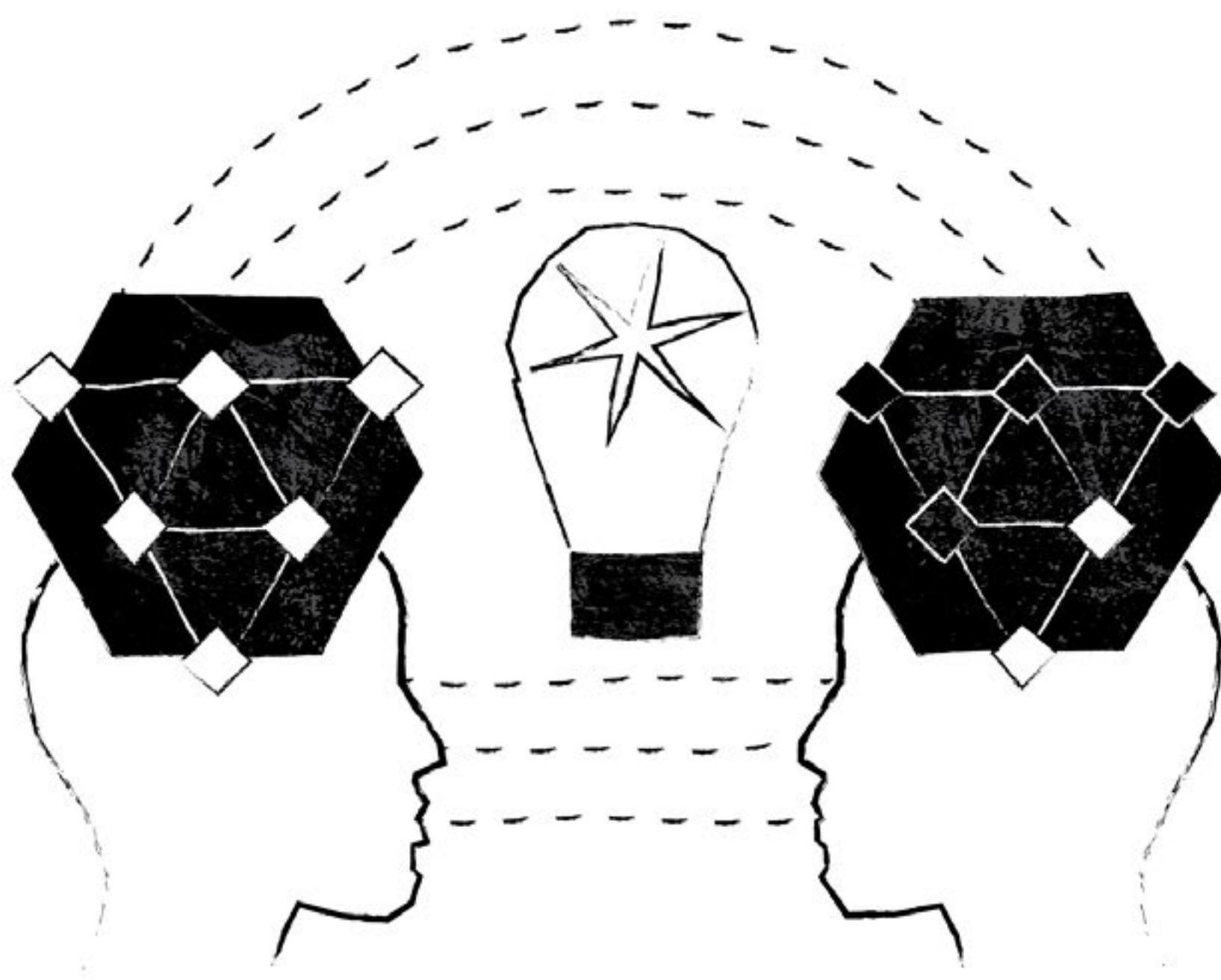
References and Reading

Perkins, H. W. (2007). Misperceptions of drinking norms in Canada: Another look at the 'reign of error' and its consequences among college students. *Addictive Behaviors*, 32(11), 2645-2656.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2007.07.007>

Perkins, H. W., Haines, M. P., & Rice, R. (2005). Misperceiving the college drinking norm and related problems: A nationwide study of exposure to prevention information, perceived norms and student alcohol misuse. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 66(4), 470-478.
<https://doi.org/10.15288/jsa.2005.66.470>

Tinsley, M., & Hendrickx, S. (2008). *Asperger Syndrome and Alcohol: Drinking to Cope?* London: Jessica Kinglsey Publishers.

White, A., & Hingson, R. (2014). The burden of alcohol use: Excessive alcohol consumption and related consequences among college students. *Alcohol Research: Current Reviews*, 35(2), 201-218. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3908712/>



Tips for Autistic Students: How to Make the Most of a Tutoring Session

by Katie Matthews

Congratulations! Going to a tutoring or writing center can be an important step in your academic maturity. Seeking support when you need it is a facet of self-advocacy and a manifestation of internal motivation. Just as many of the best students attend office hours, so, too, do exemplary students use tutoring support to help them achieve academic goals. Here, contributor Katie Matthews walks you through the steps to take once you've decided some extra academic support will benefit you.

You're going to a tutoring session. That means you've identified which class or assignment you're having difficulty with, you've contacted the teaching assistant (TA), and you've scheduled a tutoring session with the tutoring or writing center on campus. Now what? Sure, you can just show up at the right place at the right time, but to get the most benefit from your tutoring session, some preparation can help. This post will outline what you need to know and what you can do to come out of your tutoring sessions ahead.

Know Your Tutor So You Can Plan

Accordingly: is this a general tutor that works for the college and is knowledgeable about ALL areas of study, are they someone your TA

recommended, or were you referred to someone who has taken the specific class you are currently enrolled in?

- A general tutor might focus on study strategies, reviewing material, organizing, writing, and editing papers, as well as creating a plan to tackle overall workload.
- A tutor who has taken the same class before may also do the above, but they will also have experience regarding which specific materials will be the most important and what format of assessments the teacher typically gives (i.e. multiple choice vs. open ended questions). They also might be more knowledgeable about the area of study.

- Erin Campbell, a tutor at Arapahoe Community College says, *“Your institution should staff their tutoring centers with qualified staff and direct the students accordingly, and, often, the personality match of the student and tutor is more important than having taken the same exact course. Ultimately, the most important thing a student can do is understand and be able to verbalize their needs.”*



- Allyson Jones, manager and former tutor at the Frisco Writing Center at Collin College writes, *“Most college campuses have a writing center where students can go to receive one-on-one support on their writing assignments, or even on writing they are doing outside of class, such as application essays, resumes, or creative pieces. Students who know they will want writing support should locate their campus writing center at the beginning of the semester and familiarize themselves with the services offered. Some writing centers will take walk-ins while others use an appointment system. It is best not to come to the center the day a paper is due. Getting feedback earlier in the process is much more useful, as students need ample time to continue developing the paper with the aid of the tutor’s suggestions.”*

Is The Session One-on-One (Just Yourself and the Tutor), or is it a Group?

- In a group setting, a tutor might help you get started on a problem or an area, and then move on to helping someone else. Or, they may pose general questions to the whole group. To make sure your questions are heard in a group setting or that you get the help you need, do not be afraid to speak up or raise your hand to get the tutor’s attention or to ask your question.
- Look out for familiar or friendly faces in the tutoring group. These may be students willing to study together outside of the tutoring session as well. Like you, they are showing that they are concerned and thinking about their grades by attending the session.
- If it is a one-on-one session, you will have the full attention of the tutor the entire time. Take advantage of the additional time by getting through more of your questions and asking for feedback on your specific work.

Come Prepared

- Bring all class materials, notes, books, and **questions**.
- Check online with your campus’s tutoring center website for additional guidelines for what to bring.
- Regarding writing-specific tutors, Allyson adds, *“In our center, we ask students to prepare for their session by gathering any materials that the tutor and student might*

want to refer to while reviewing a piece of writing. For students who have just received a writing assignment and are unsure about how to begin, this might just mean bringing a printout of the professor's assignment sheet or writing prompt. Writing tutors are happy to help students brainstorm; students who come in for help at this stage generally leave their session with a page full of ideas, or even an outline, and feel much more confident about proceeding with their paper. Students who are further along in the writing process are asked to bring their partial or completed draft...as well as any sources they are citing in the paper (especially if they need citation help)."

- Be prepared to have a conversation with your tutor about which areas are especially challenging or confusing, or where you feel you are getting stuck within the process.

Think About Your Timing

- Coming in right before a test or the day an assignment is due potentially will not allow for enough time for the tutor to offer as much support or guidance.
- Expect that the tutoring center will be busier around midterms and finals.
- Take a look at upcoming assignments in your planner. Check the tutoring schedule or email your tutor ahead of time to see if there is a time available the week before it's due. For a bigger assignment, plan times to meet further than a week out.

Always remember that tutoring is not just for struggling students. It is a service available for anyone who wants a second opinion on how their studying or writing is going or wants to improve their performance. Taking advantage of what your campus offers can make the biggest difference between overall success and confidence in your academic career! Have you ever seen a tutor at school? What were the best and worst parts about your experience? [Join the conversation!](#)



Looking for Connections on Campus? Join a Club!

by Patrick Dwyer

Finding friendships and social connections in college can seem daunting, I know. Depending on what school you plan to attend, there might be tens of thousands of other students on campus, rushing from class to class. You might be sitting in classes with hundreds of other students. How does one start making friends in such an overwhelming crowd? It's easy to become painfully isolated, especially if you live off-campus or don't get along with others in your residence. Indeed, difficulties with social interaction are the most common challenge reported in research on autistic college students (Anderson, Stephenson, & Carter, 2017).

But before we tackle the challenge of social isolation at college, I hope you'll forgive me if we take some time to consider the background to the problem. In a fascinating article, Elizabeth Fein (2015) suggests that our modern world has, in some ways, made it more difficult for autistic people to connect with others. Humans used to live in smaller communities, and in a sense, you were stuck with the people around you. People might

not always get along, but they had to live with one another. However, in the modern world, many of us live in enormous cities. If we don't enjoy spending time with others, we can just find new friends. Those of us on the autistic spectrum might be less comfortable friends for most neurotypical people, so we can get left behind in this more competitive environment.

Grade school is, in a sense, a bit like the way the world used to be. You're sort of stuck with people. To put it mildly, you won't always get along with others – I've been bullied, and many autistics will have been similarly victimized – but it's perhaps easier to avoid becoming completely isolated.

College is different. When there are thousands of students, who can freely choose to hang out with whomever they please, it's easy for us autistics to get completely left out. At college, in a way, there's a sort of competition for friendship, and those of us with worse social skills are at a disadvantage in that competition.

Now, you might think that working on your social skills is the solution to this problem. If friendship is all really just a sort of competition, then you might think that the best way to find friends is to fit in better, to beat the competition in the game of being the most typical. But that's not my point here – quite the contrary, in fact!

The flip side of the freedom to choose friends is that it's possible for those of us who might be a little on the quirky side – whether or not we have a formal autism diagnosis – to hang out with one another. In a qualitative study on the friendships of autistic adults, researchers found that the most successful friendships were not based on the autistic adults successfully meeting the expectations of neurotypical society, but instead, on common interests and on the acceptance of atypical behavior (Sosnowy et al., 2018). Autistic participants in the study said that their genuine relationships weren't about trying to fit in, but about being accepted for themselves.

Indeed, not only can it be stressful and unrewarding to maintain the pretense of being someone you are not, but you might still be unable to succeed as well as a neurotypical student. Studies by Sasson and colleagues (2017) found that neurotypical people can instantly form negative judgments of autistic people based only on subtle differences in how we move and express ourselves in short video clips and even in still images. There are genuine limits to the degree to which most of us can successfully pretend to be normal.

Of course, this still leaves us with a big challenge: how do we find people who would share common interests with us, who would enjoy spending time with us, and who would accept us for who we are?

Well, that's where clubs come in! Colleges will generally have numerous student-run clubs. Clubs are very popular with autistic students – one study suggests that joining a club is the most common non-academic support used by autistic students (Anderson, Carter, & Stephenson, 2017), and that's for good reason. Based on my experience and the experiences of other autistic students, my best recommendation for any autistic student seeking friendships is to find information about clubs, identify some clubs that look interesting, and try attending one of their meetings. If you feel a sense of connection with the other club members, you could join that club. If you don't feel that connection, you could try another club.

There are a number of ways you can find information about clubs. There's usually an online directory maintained by the college or by the student society. This directory should list all of the clubs on campus and it should have some way you could contact the club organizers. If the directory provides the organizers' email address, but not meeting dates and times, you could just send a short email saying that you are a student interested in joining the club and asking if they could please send you any relevant information, including the date and time of their next meeting.

Furthermore, around the beginning of the fall semester (and perhaps at the beginning of the winter/spring semester as well), your college will probably hold some kind of forum where representatives of clubs can sit at tables and offer information to prospective members. If the event is held indoors, it might be too noisy, but if you don't mind the noise or if the event is held outside, you could attend. The advantages of this approach are that you would get to meet one or two people from the club, which might give you a better sense of whether the club is a good fit for you, and also that you might feel more comfortable at the club meeting if you already know someone from the club.

My personal experience with college clubs starts even before I was accepted to the school where I did my undergraduate studies. Because I knew about a peer-support group for autistic students on that campus, I asked the club's facilitator – another autistic student – if I could attend before being formally admitted, and he let me in. I later joined a larger disability group as well. Many if not most of the social connections I formed on campus came from these two groups. Personally, I think there's something incredibly special about communities of autistic and neurodivergent people: we're not all alike, but we all know what it's like to be different, which makes us more accepting of people for who they are.

Of course, that's not to say that friendships based on shared interests can't be incredibly rewarding as well. There are even empirical studies – albeit in a grade school setting – that show how successful

clubs based on interests can be (Koegel et al., 2012, 2013). I've always had intense interests, at least since elementary school, and it's rewarding to be able to talk about them with people who really care.

Some Additional Notes You Might Find Helpful:

- Many clubs are purely recreational, with members having some common interest, but others might be professional clubs for students in a particular field or discipline. The first type of clubs are more likely to be free, while the professional clubs are perhaps more likely to have membership dues. Some clubs may allow members to drop by meetings when they have time and interest, while others might demand a larger time commitment. It's probably a good idea to check about costs and time commitments when you are considering joining a club.
- Clubs usually have high turnover, because some students are always graduating, and others are arriving. Thus, even if you didn't connect with the members of a club in the past, it might be worth checking in again after a year or two, in case the club's membership has changed.
- If you are anxious about attending a club meeting, you could ask a friend or support person to come with you. College students are usually busy, but you could also try asking one of the organizers if you could meet them before the club meeting. (It is, of course, perfectly normal to be nervous before entering an unfamiliar

environment. Back when I was still in grade school, I made the organizers of a theatre group come to my house, and meet me in that safe setting, before I would commit to joining their group!)

- The Organization for Autism Research (2018) produces [a guide to college for autistic students](#). On page 63, there's a handy checklist of things to remember when you are organizing yourself to go to a club meeting.

And of course, please feel free to join this conversation and add any comments you may have about this post! Have you ever joined a club – and if so, how did it work? Is there something you think I've forgotten or overlooked? [Let us know your thoughts](#).

References

- Anderson, A. H., Carter, M., & Stephenson, J. (2017). Perspectives of university students with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3257-3>
- Anderson, A. H., Stephenson, J., & Carter, M. (2017). A systematic literature review of the experiences and supports of students with autism spectrum disorder in post-secondary education. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 39, 33–53. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2017.04.002>
- Fein, E. (2015). "No one has to be your friend": Asperger's syndrome and the vicious cycle of social disorder in late modern identity markets. *Ethos*, 43(1), 82–107. <https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12073>
- Koegel, R., Fredeen, R., Kim, S., Danial, J., Rubinstein, D., & Koegel, L. (2012). Using perseverative interests to improve interactions between adolescents with autism and their typical peers in school settings. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 14(3), 133–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098300712437043>
- Koegel, R., Kim, S., Koegel, L., & Schwartzman, B. (2013). Improving socialization for high school students with ASD by using their preferred interests. *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 43(9), 2121–2134. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-013-1765-3>
- Organization for Autism Research. (2018). *Finding your way: A college guide for students on the spectrum*. Arlington, VA: Organization for Autism Research. Retrieved from <https://researchautism.org/findingyourway/>
- Sasson, N. J., Faso, D. J., Nugent, J., Lovell, S., Kennedy, D. P., & Grossman, R. B. (2017). Neurotypical peers are less willing to interact with those with autism based on thin slice judgments. *Scientific Reports*, 7, 40700. <https://doi.org/10.1038/srep40700>
- Sosnowy, C., Silverman, C., Shattuck, P., & Garfield, T. (2018). Setbacks and successes: How young adults on the autism spectrum seek friendship. *Autism in Adulthood*, 1(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2018.0009>

SECTION III: EDUCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL ADVANCEMENT



Just as every successful transition into college is unique, so is the transition to advanced education and professional life. We orient this final section with our Social World pillar content, affirming the kinds of relationships that can support and serve autistic job-seekers. The workforce is changing. Companies like Microsoft have raised expectations for and created interest in disability-hiring initiatives, and that's good news for autistic job seekers everywhere. That said, corporate culture has a long way to go before we can say opportunity meets demand for autistic employment and the important quality-of-life experiences that satisfying work brings. Content in this final section empowers autistic students to critique and reframe a tired argument about autistic people in tech as well as provides students with a blueprint for applying to grad school. We also hear from people in the field—the director of a lab and current STEM employees, giving insight into grad culture and workforce realities. Knowledge is power.





The Social World

by Arianne Garcia

Socializing while autistic can be very tricky when you aren't talking to other autistic people. Neurotypicals have additional layers of communication that involve tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions. As an autistic person, it may seem to benefit you to copy and learn as many of these subtle intricacies as possible. This is a common coping mechanism amongst autistic people, and is called 'masking.' It is particularly common in autistic people who have the skills to succeed in a college setting.

Masking is when an autistic person "acts normal." Examples of this are forcing eye contact, mimicking social behaviors (overly expressive facial expressions, attempts at sarcasm, copying body language, conscious nodding, etc.), and suppressing comfortable autistic behaviors (hand flapping, rocking, repetitive movements, etc.). This is often done to make friends and establish social connections, obtain jobs or job interviews, and is driven by a desire to be accepted. This might sound like a great idea, but evidence and studies show that masking

autistic behaviors produces excess stress, anxiety, feelings of loneliness or isolation, and even depression. These feelings will distract you from your studies or workforce pursuits. "Acting normal" is not good for an autistic person's mental health or identity.

So, How do You Socialize While Being "Openly Autistic"?



To be "openly autistic" is to be aware of your own needs, behaviors, reactions, and limitations, and being willing to communicate those things.

You must also learn how to advocate for your own needs. This is important because there will be times when you're shutting down or reaching your limit and this information needs to be communicated to the person you're with, especially someone you're trying to formulate a long-term friendship or professional relationship with. For example, if your study group knows you're autistic and have light sensitivity, then they will be more

inclined to choose a study location with lower lighting. Another example is understanding your own limitations and not pushing yourself further than you can take. Meltdowns and shutdowns must be taken seriously **by you**. Your parents may not be around to help you through these, so you need to learn your own triggers and avoid them, even if you're around others. Stimming can be fun and done for happy reasons, but if you notice your stimming has quickened pace or if you start to feel anxious, self evaluate and pay attention to your own physical responses and your environment. Take steps to reduce excess stimuli and excuse yourself if you've had enough. You can also let the people you're with know that you're having a difficult time. If you need a moment to gather yourself but aren't at home or your dorm room, you can always excuse yourself to the bathroom to take a break.

Making Friends

Autistic people socially engage based on environmental and ecological perceptions, not on emotional cues. Because of this, it is better to become friends with people based on shared interests or experiences, as that reduces the need to rely on social cues. In my experience making friends or establishing professional relationships, it's best to start slow. When I'm explaining aspects of my autism in the beginning of our friendship or professional relationship, neurotypicals (typically) don't remember everything that I say and can get overwhelmed with the information. Patience is necessary on both sides—they need it to understand you, and you need it to understand them. If you

don't understand a phrase, question it. If something makes you uncomfortable, mention it. Hang around the people that respect your questions and mentions, and stay away from people who intentionally try to confuse you or make you uncomfortable. Be wary of, and stay away from, people with bad intentions who want to take advantage of you. How can you recognize people who may have hidden agendas or ulterior motives? They often display a myriad of behaviors including lying, shaming and denial, and won't act in your best interest.

Handling Misunderstandings



Due to the innate differences between an autistic brain and a neurotypical brain, there **will** be misunderstandings and miscommunication.

There will be times when you don't even realize a misunderstanding is happening until it's already happened. It's important to take these misunderstandings in stride. You have to be willing to explain yourself and be open to correcting yourself if you were in the wrong. Lots of relationships end because there is a breakdown in communication and neither side is willing to take responsibility for their own understanding. Some particularly emotional neurotypicals may demand an apology for misunderstandings that hurt their feelings. If you value their friendship, apologize, even if you aren't completely sure why they are upset or if you weren't wrong. One of the most important aspects of maintaining friendships and relationships is that

feelings are very important, even if they don't make any sense or are based on incorrect information.

Establishing long-term friendships and relationships is an important part of the college experience. The people you become friends with may be important in your future: they may help you get a job, be your boss, be a job reference, or even become your emotional support through tough times. They may even be willing to explain neurotypical behaviors to you to help you handle social situations you may not otherwise have been prepared for. Just remember to be yourself and be aware of your own abilities and limitations so you can communicate them to others when necessary. All relationships include ups-and-downs, but keeping these

strategies and perspectives in mind can help you forge the friendships and academic or professional relationships that will be an important part of your collegiate experience.

Have a question or comment for Arianne or other members of our community? Let us know your thoughts [in the forum for student social life](#).



Finding the Right Fit: Good Tech Internships Empower Autistic Students

by Abi Hunter

STEM contributor Abi Hunter flips the script on “paternalistic and exploitative” discussions about autistic employees. Read on for a savvy and empowering approach to thinking about careers in tech.

“Think of a child with autism as a robot born without instructions that you need to program yourself before it’s of any use,” wrote one author of an article about autistic people in tech. I don’t think I have to justify my revulsion; the conversation about autistic people in technology or in the workforce (or in life, period) is fraught with dehumanizing metaphors and explanations of how **yes, actually, autistic people can even be useful to you.** “Overwork your autistic employees,” they say. “They won’t mind!”

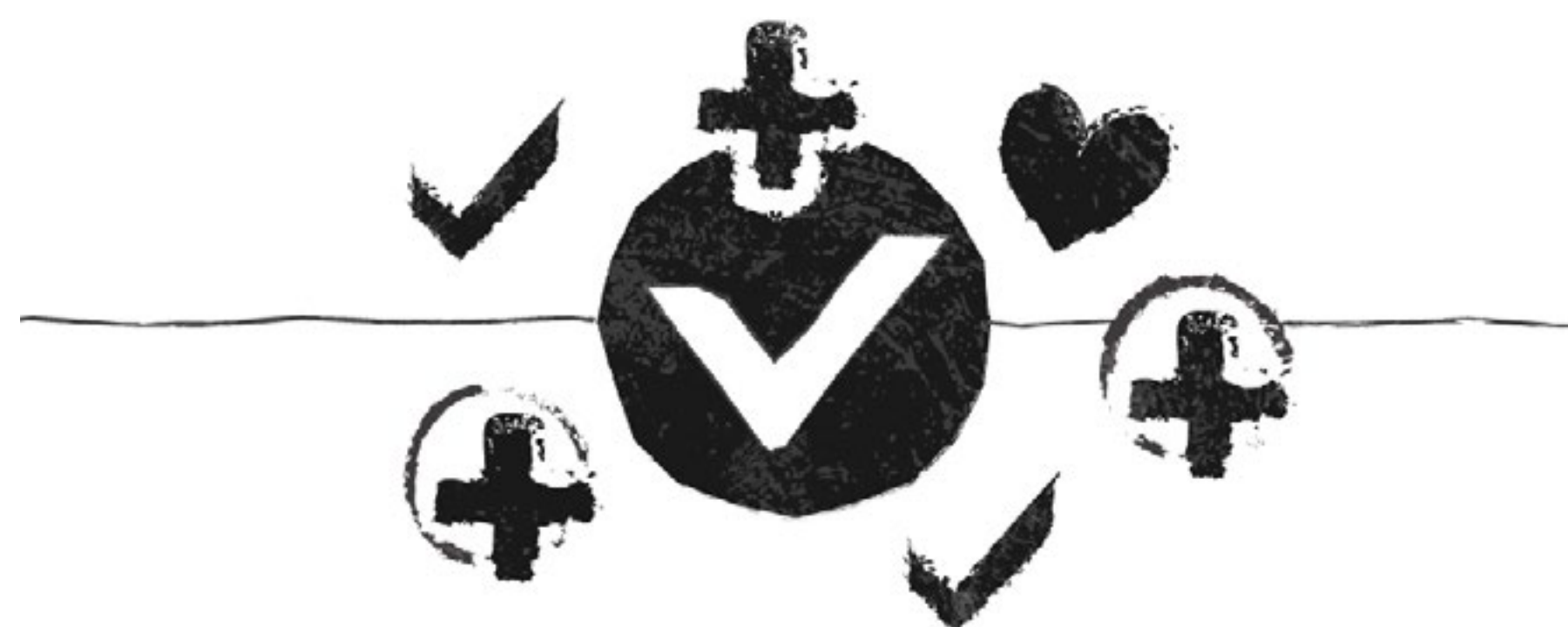
As a woman in STEM, and earning an advanced degree in computer science, I’m already in a minority. And, despite what I suspect is over representation of autistic people in the software engineering world, sheer numbers mean that I’m also a minority in that regard. There are just too many neurotypical people in the world for us to

outnumber them or come close to doing so, even in a field where skills like analytical thought, logical outlook, and ability to focus are an asset. These are traits that many autistic people possess in spades, but that doesn’t make us a majority by any means.

This means that the conversation in tech, as in so many other places, skews both paternalistic and exploitative. If you google “autistic people in tech,” most of the articles you’ll get are about how autistic people can benefit the companies where they work. They’re about the ‘untapped resources’ among autistic people. How we can make companies better. How we can help startups get off the ground. They’re dehumanizing. They talk about people as resources, not as individuals.



This is not one of those articles. This is not about how the tech industry can benefit from you; rather, it's about how you can benefit from working in the tech industry, the traits that might make it a good fit, and how if it's right for you, it can be a rewarding, enjoyable, and sustainable long-term job.



I was drawn to a career in programming because solving programming problems feels like a logic puzzle. The wild, unbelievable idea that someone might pay me to solve logic puzzles all day long made me pursue internships in technology after my sophomore year in college, and more specifically internships in software engineering. I was inexperienced; I had only taken two programming classes, and I had never done my own project or participated in someone else's. But I managed to convince a small startup to hire me.

It wasn't the first time I had worked in tech. The summer before, I had done marketing and research work for another startup, but the big difference was the work I was doing: building the product versus working to promote it. In both cases, I found the culture a refreshing change from the previous full-time job I had held: canvassing door to door.

To a certain degree, because of some of my strengths, I made a good canvasser. I am persuasive and good at sticking to a script. It was still an awful job, one that sapped

my emotional, social, and physical energy. Programming for eight hours a day was the diametric opposite. That's not to say I wasn't tired at the end of a day. Anyone would be. But not only was the work itself better for me, the workflow was as well.

Most startups follow a model that essentially relies on large to-do lists, and I, like many autistic people, thrive on checking off tasks and visualizing my progress towards a goal. With the focus on work towards a goal rather than putting in hours on a specific schedule, in many (but not all) workplaces it is easier to both work from home and work on flexible hours. It is important to communicate and clear this with your boss. It's not acceptable all places, but the culture among startups often makes acceptance of these practices more common.

While software in 2019 is often a collaborative and team effort, many tools and practices common among startups can make this easier than in other environments: Slack and other common workplace chat programs make it easy to take time to compose messages and think about what I'm going to say. Meetings via webcam mean that eye contact isn't expected. In fact, it's practically impossible.

It is important, for us perhaps more than many others, however, to know when to go home. The video-game savvy may have heard about the weeks leading up to game release, sometimes called "the crunch," when some employees can be encouraged to work 100-hour weeks. Most software operates on a shorter release schedule, and the hours are less extreme but may still go beyond

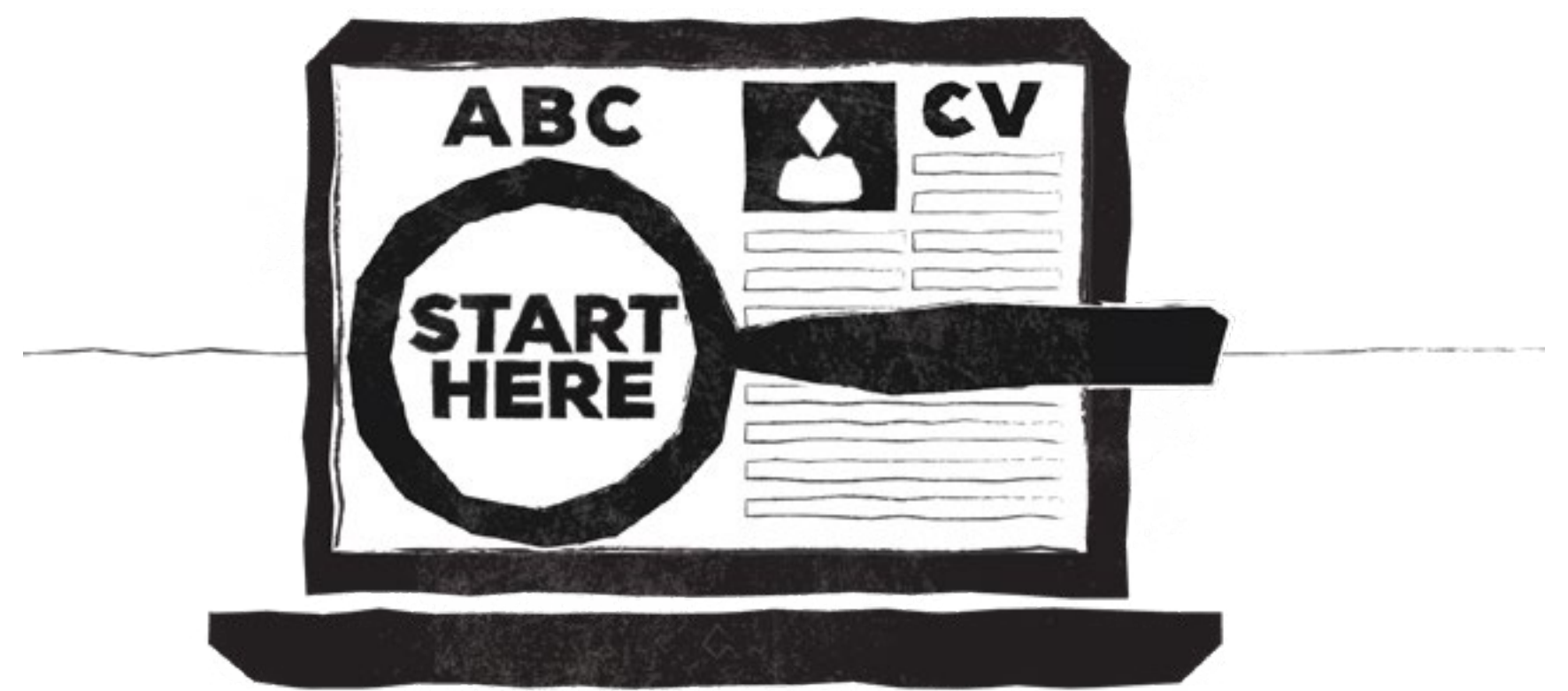
40 hours per week. Even when working on a project that matters to you, it's still important to enforce boundaries and do what you're being paid for. Many people act as though because autistic people can be prone to special interests and hyperfocus, it's ok to overwork us. This isn't true. We deserve lives outside of work just as anyone else does, and we deserve to go home at the end of the day and relax. This is a boundary that can be very important to maintain and enforce, especially as young people entering the workforce. Burn-out, loss of joy, even seasonal depression from lack of sunlight can impact our ability to do well at our jobs as well as our mental and physical health.

Even with that caveat, there are many things about workplace culture that make startups good for some autistic people. These workflow benefits can be common among branches of work to varying degrees, but they're definitely not all restricted solely to the techies in the office. Depending on the workplace, they can be found in HR, product development, design, management, and others. Even if your strengths lie somewhere other than product development, there might be a place for you among the thousands of companies out there. The model isn't right for everyone. It's not even right for every autistic person. What it can be is right for some autistic people, and even harmonize beautifully with our strengths and talents to allow us to follow enriching and enjoyable careers in tech.

In the end, despite the sometimes overwhelming message from people in

tech and people in the media, claiming that we benefit the tech industry so much, we're allowed to take care of ourselves. For me, the most rewarding jobs have been in the tech field, and that's why I've chosen it. I'd love to hear from others who have also found a career in tech to be rewarding, [so if you have questions or comments, please don't hesitate to use the comment box!](#)

That's great, Abi! But how do I go about starting a career in tech?



A lot of people in the industry are self-taught, which can be a problem if you suffer from executive dysfunction and find it really hard to focus on just one thing, like if you sign up for five different Coursera courses and forget about them all within two weeks (guilty as charged). For me, the best thing was to take a class: it forced me to turn in assignments and maintain my dedication over the whole quarter. Once you've done that, or if you're self-motivated enough to finish a whole edX or Coursera course on your own (and good for you!) go ahead and put it on your resume and LinkedIn.

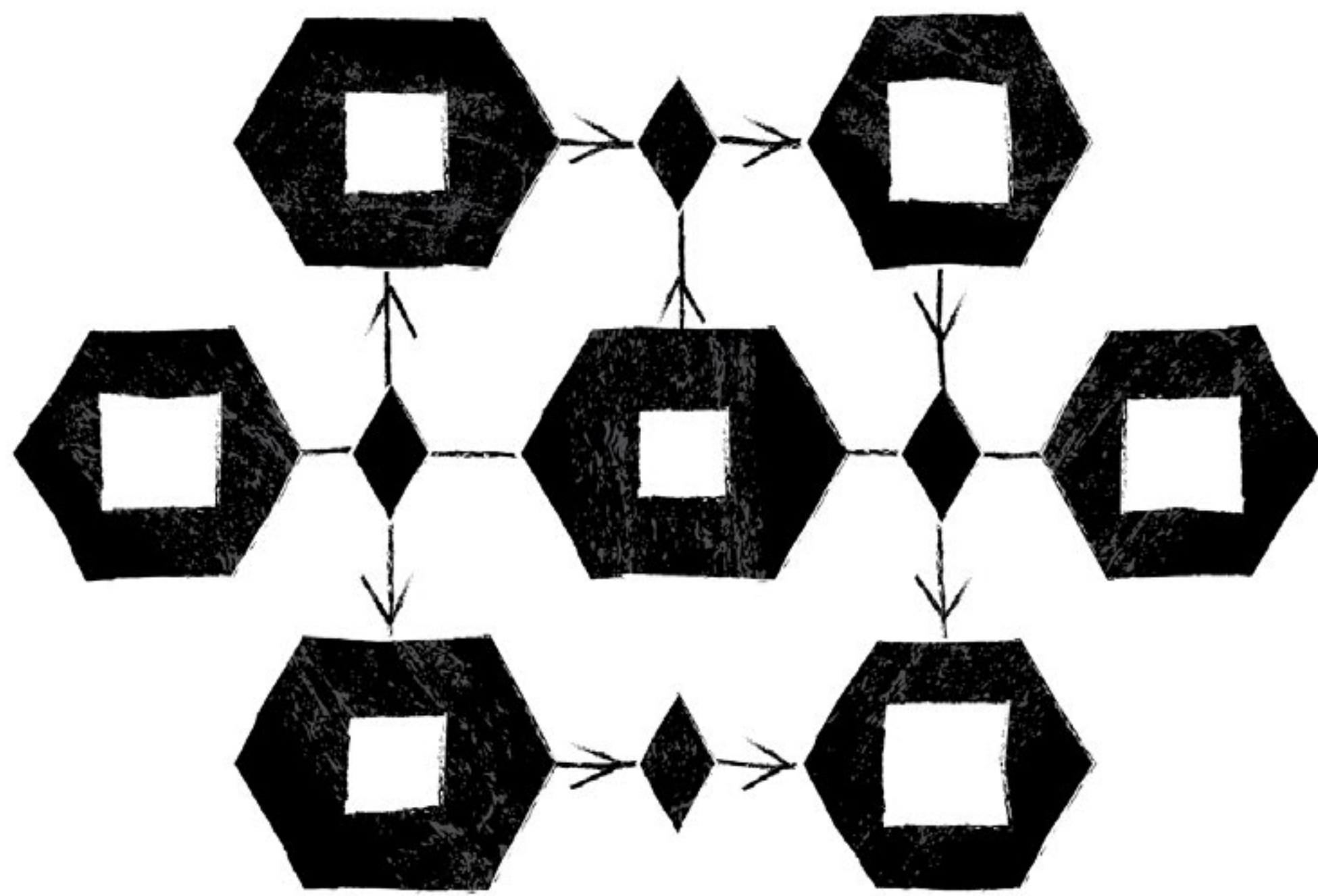
"X seeking Y" can be a good LinkedIn header, cover letter opener, or objective for your resume. Even if you're not in the industry yet, you can still be a " _ major seeking internship in software engineering," and

that can tell people that you're interested, especially people in your network who might be looking. If you've learned a programming language, put that down too, but also be careful not to over-exaggerate what you've done. It's ok to say you're a beginner. A lot of interviews at good companies will focus less on exactly what technologies you know, and more on how you think and approach problems.

If you are trying to break into software engineering, I can't recommend sites like HackerRank enough--they'll get you used to approaching problems in a systematic way that will come in handy in interviews, and grow your expertise in your chosen language

quickly. If you're at a university with a career center, they'll probably have programs and resources specifically for people seeking jobs in tech. You can email them, go see them in person, or potentially even just sign up for an email list. An online jobs board specific to your university, if there is one, can also be a good resource, and you can search for keywords.

And finally, if you've started to look at offers, Glassdoor can be a great place to find out if the place you're thinking about working is going to be a good environment for you.



Problem-Focused Coping: Autism and Preparing for Graduate School in Research Fields

by Patrick Dwyer

As you go about your post-secondary studies, you may find yourself thinking about what you'll do after you've graduated. These sorts of transitions can be stressful! There is much uncertainty, and it's natural to worry. But perhaps the most effective way of coping with such stress is problem-focused coping: actively taking steps to prepare for the transition from college to whatever lies ahead.

One path that you might want to take is the path to grad school. In some fields (especially computer science and some branches of engineering), people can often find good jobs with just a Bachelor's degree. As a result, relatively few domestic students go on to seek graduate degrees in those fields, and [those graduate programs often have to look internationally to recruit students](#). But in other fields, a traditional four-year Bachelor's degree just doesn't have as much value in today's economy. [In those fields, getting a graduate degree might](#)

[dramatically boost one's employment prospects](#). My own field of psychology, which is one of the most popular undergraduate majors, is one of these fields.

Unfortunately, [we often don't do a good job of explicitly explaining important things to undergraduate students](#). How to prepare oneself for graduate school is definitely one of these things that we don't tend to communicate well. Graduate schools have very definite ideas about what a successful applicant to a graduate program looks like, but this is information that we don't really explicitly give to people. You can't even rely on the lists of requirements that are put up by graduate programs – there's a pretty good chance that they haven't bothered to mention some important expectations.

I am putting this next sentence in bold because it is very important: ***The only way to get good information about the unwritten expectations of preparing for graduate school***

is to talk to the experts – to your professors and your teaching assistants (TAs). I'm providing some information here, and I hope that it will be helpful, but you should still try to engage your local experts in a discussion about graduate school in your chosen field.

Fortunately, I managed to navigate the graduate school application process – in part because I was able to get good information from professors. I'm currently at UC Davis, studying in a graduate program in experimental psychology (which is **not** the same thing as clinical psychology – see my little appendix below). If everything continues to proceed smoothly and without complications, I should have a PhD in three or four years.

Early Preparations

Some parts of preparation for graduate school begin early. You may not be anywhere near ready to apply for graduate school or even to decide what specific field interests you, but if you think you might be going to grad school, you should still be thinking about the need to get the right kinds of experience on your resume.

In part, I only got where I am because I was lucky enough to get one of the more important requirements for experimental psychology grad school, which is plenty of research experience. At the beginning of the second year of my undergraduate studies, I more or less stumbled into a position as a paid research assistant in a psychology lab. I enjoyed the work, so I went ahead and also registered in a seminar class that was focused on doing research in a psychology lab, and in my final year, I participated in the

honors program and got even more research experience through that.

If you are looking for research experience, you can probably find it volunteering in a professor's lab – you might even be able to get course credit for it. That experience might then be a stepping-stone to other research experiences.

I was lucky to get as much research experience as I did early on, because a lot of people in psychology graduate programs actually have to take a year or longer between their undergraduate or graduate degrees getting research experience working as a lab manager. Nobody said that getting a graduate degree was quick and easy.

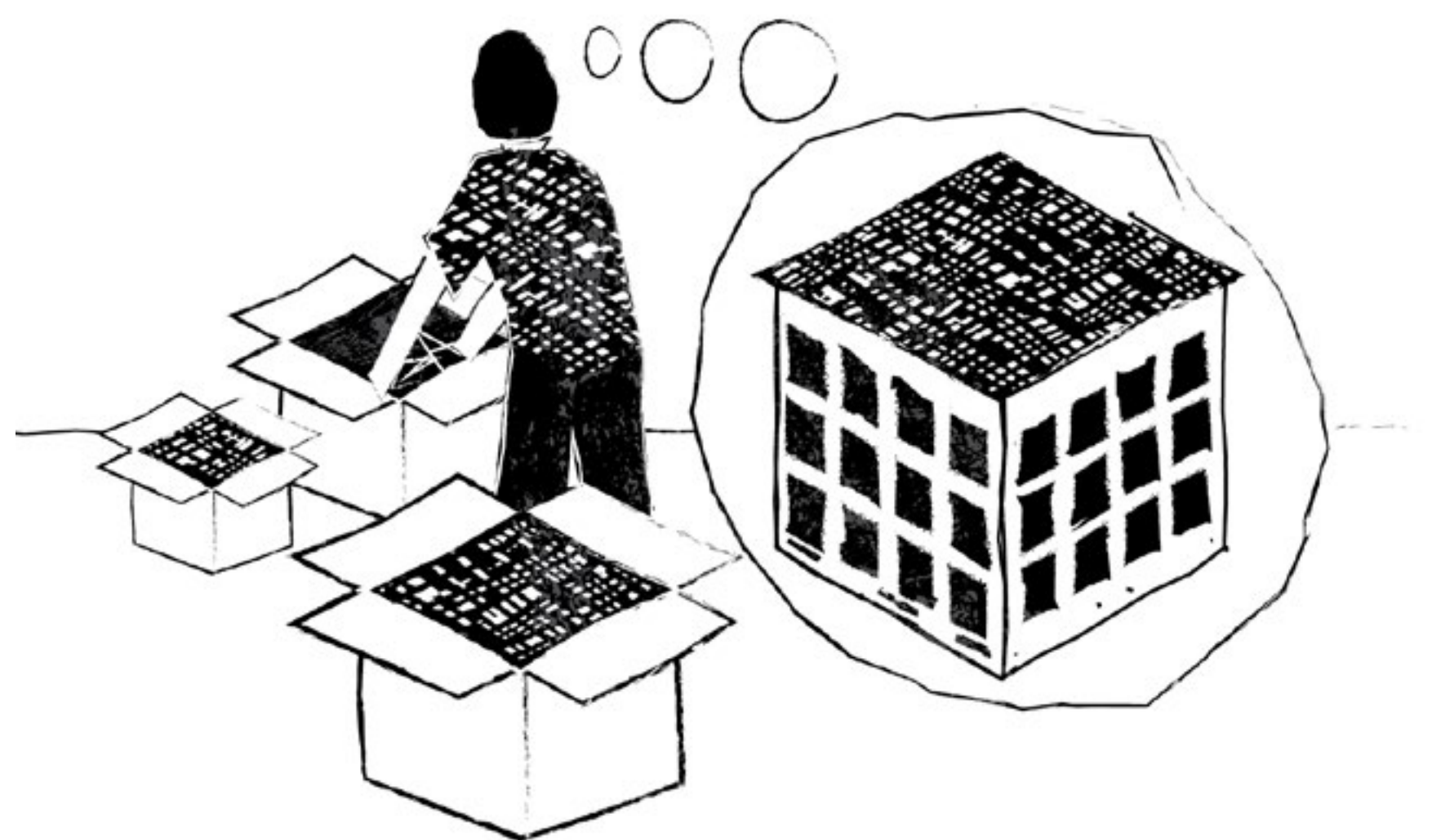
There are lots of other things on the checklist of steps towards making oneself a competitive applicant for experimental psychology graduate programs. They include, but may not be limited to:

- **Good grades** – especially in your third and fourth years. (Americans call those the junior and senior years.) There's usually some flexibility in terms of how good depending on the quality of the program and how outstanding you are in other areas.
- **General work and volunteer experience.** Although psychology graduate schools are especially interested in research experience, it's good to have some "roundness." Ideally, you want to show that you are a responsible person, that your past experiences are interesting and contribute some value to who you are, and that you care about your community.



In general, if you want to go to graduate school, I would encourage you to go slowly through your studies and make sure to get lots of interesting experiences on the way. I ended up taking five years to get my Bachelor's degree, not four, but that gave me the extra time to get lots of interesting experience on my resume. It made me a much more competitive candidate.

Final Preparations and Applications



Of course, eventually you will reach a time where you're actively preparing to apply for graduate school and ready to get the specific details of your applications together.

One of the first things you need to get out of the way are Graduate Record Examination (GRE) tests. I actually left these a little late, finishing them in a stressful rush late in the fall, while I was in the middle of the academic semester, just before my graduate applications were due in December! Please learn from my mistakes and get them done earlier.

In experimental psychology, the mentor-mentee relationship is absolutely crucial. Because our programs are focused on research, students are going to spend a lot of their time working in the lab completing

research projects. In most programs (although not all), students will be paired with a specific mentor from the moment of their acceptance. Thus, it is crucial to look up information online and find potential faculty mentors whose research excites your interest. When you identify such people, [you can write a polite email introducing yourself and asking if they are currently looking to recruit a new graduate student.](#)

Another good piece of advice, I think, is to apply widely. How widely, I suppose, should depend on how easy it would be for you to move to an unfamiliar community. Do you have family commitments that will keep you in one place? Do you think you are ready to live independently? If you do have the flexibility to move anywhere you want, I would recommend applying to at least ten programs. If not, apply as widely as you can.

You might also want to apply to slightly different types of programs at schools of differing quality. It's possible that you might find, as you move through the applications process, that your interests are shifting from one area to another. Alternatively, you might find that the schools you were hoping to get into are too competitive. It's good to have options – a Plan B, as it were.

After you send in your applications, you will be invited to visit any graduate programs that are interested in you for a final set of interviews. Because these visits go by extraordinarily quickly (generally over the course of a single day), you should be prepared to absorb all the information you can about the program's culture and

whether it is compatible with your own interests and working style.

When you are preparing for visits to a prospective graduate program, you should think about questions to ask graduate students currently enrolled in the program. This is delicate, especially if you anticipate that you might encounter challenges or barriers due to your autism and want to get

a sense of how accepting and supportive the program might be. Faculty will generally ask current graduate students for their impressions of a candidate, so you might not want to ask particularly unusual or probing questions. Instead, you might want to focus on generalities, asking about the degree to which faculty members are involved in and supportive of their students' work.

SOME SAMPLE QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT WANT TO ASK GRADUATE STUDENTS TO GET INFORMATION ABOUT A PROGRAM, LAB, AND FACULTY MENTOR:

- 1. How often do you meet with [faculty mentor]? Is [faculty mentor] available when students have questions?**
- 2. Do students in this lab generally work on their own projects or does [faculty mentor] have projects for students to work on?**
- 3. What does it take to get authorship on a publication in this lab? What does it take to get first authorship?**
- 4. Do you generally find that the culture among graduate students here is collaborative or competitive?**
- 5. Do students ever switch labs and faculty mentors? Does the program offer support to students if they start to have a poor relationship with their faculty mentor?**
- 6. How much time do graduate students have to spend working as TA's?**
- 7. Do some students take longer than expected to finish their degrees, and does the program support such students?**
- 8. Do a lot of graduate students here have families? Does the program support these students if they have to invest time in family?**
- 9. What do you like about this graduate program?**
- 10. Are there things you dislike about this program or that you wish you had known before you started here?**

You might also want to spend some time practicing for the interviews beforehand, maybe role-playing with someone, since interviews can be very difficult and stressful for many of us on the autism spectrum.

One other thing to consider is money. You may or may not be aware of this, but in good experimental psychology research programs, there is an expectation that the program will be paying the graduate student, not vice versa. Psychology graduate students are basically people with jobs: we do research, we work as TAs, and so forth. Yes, we do some coursework, we take some graduate seminars, but I still think it's reasonable for us to expect financial support. So when you visit programs, you should definitely try to get the details.

If you look online, you should be able to find plenty of much more detailed advice about the process of applying for graduate schools. I've been quite general here.

The Question of Disclosure



You should also spend some time thinking about whether you want to disclose your autism diagnosis, and if so, at what stage. (In your initial application? After you have been accepted?) This is an extremely difficult question to answer. In my case, I disclosed, but I was explicitly applying to do autism research, so I had a reasonable expectation that people would be more familiar with autism and would be relatively accepting. My diagnosis was also very relevant to my story – to my decision to pursue research in the autism field – which

made it difficult to leave it out of my application letters. Furthermore, I wanted to see how people would react – if they reacted negatively, perhaps their program would not be the right fit.

On the other hand, while I don't have any proof of this or anything, I am almost certain that some programs reacted negatively to my diagnosis. I'm pretty sure that, in some cases, it was off-putting enough to the graduate programs that they ended up choosing a safer, neurotypical candidate. Your prospective faculty mentor may get lots of applications, and when they are thinking about making a commitment to work with someone for many years, they may want to "play it safe." An autistic candidate might not appear a safe prospect to some people.

Ultimately, for yourself and in your own particular context, you will have to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of disclosure and decide accordingly.

And I Repeat: Talk to Professors and TAs

I hope this has been helpful in illuminating some aspects of the hidden expectations related to preparation for graduate school in my field. Due to the complexity of these issues and the limited space I have available, this post can unfortunately only cover some of the most general expectations. As I said before, whether you are applying to programs in experimental psychology, or some other field entirely, you should definitely try to get advice from professors and TAs. You could go to their office hours, if the office hours aren't busy with students who have urgent course-related questions, but you might

instead want to send them a [respectful email](#) saying that you are interested in graduate school and that you are hoping to ask them for advice. If you can, try to go to the meetings with some specific idea of what information you are trying to get from the conversation.

[Please do add any comments you have](#) – questions, relevant experiences, additional thoughts, or whatever else you might want to share!

APPENDIX: EXPERIMENTAL VS. CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY	
EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY	CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY
You can apply to a Master’s program or to a combined Master’s-PhD program.	You could apply to “research-practitioner” PhD programs or practitioner-only PsyD programs.
Hard to get into, not for everyone, but the difficulty will vary a lot depending on the quality of the school. As noted earlier, research experience is important.	The clinical PhD programs might be the most difficult kind of graduate program to get into. It’s not impossible, but law or medicine would be easier. Research experience is still important for PhD programs, but you will also need community/clinical experience. The PsyD programs aren’t quite as competitive as the PhD programs.
Depending on whether you applied to a Master’s-only program or a combined program, you are probably looking at 2-5 years of work, or longer if you choose to move more slowly. Considering that you will have TA duties, research, and classes, you’ll be pretty busy.	PhD programs can involve about 7 years of intense work (or longer if you go slowly) doing research, comprehensive coursework, practicums and clinic hours, and TA hours. PsyD programs aren’t quite as busy.
Your employment prospects are pretty good – hopefully you’ll learn enough programming and statistics to be competitive in industry, working for the big companies. If you don’t mind getting a postdoctoral position first, you could try to get a faculty job, although those are harder to come by.	We always need more clinicians. The problem is getting into these programs; the whole reason they invented the PsyD was because we weren’t training enough clinical PhDs. On the other hand, if you just want to help people in the community, you could do that with a degree in counseling and save yourself a lot of stress.



On Mentorship, Lab Environments, and Job Applicant Disclosure: an Interview with Chemistry Professor Jen Heemstra

by John Caldora

Editorial Board Member John Caldora recently had the chance to correspond with Dr. Jen Heemstra, who runs Heemstra Lab at Emory University in Georgia. Their discussion includes considerations for autistic students about disclosing as a job applicant and the social expectations in the lab environment. One thing that really stands out from this exchange is the importance of finding a mentor who will champion you and support your academic and professional success. Thank you for speaking with us, Jen!

Jen Heemstra received her B.S. in Chemistry from the University of California, Irvine, in 2000. At Irvine, she performed undergraduate research with Prof. James Nowick investigating the folding of synthetic beta-sheet mimics, which instilled in her a love of supramolecular chemistry. Jen then moved to the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where she completed her Ph.D. with Prof. Jeffrey Moore in 2005 studying the reactivity of pyridine-functionalized phenylene ethynylene cavitands. After a brief stint in industry as a medicinal chemist, she moved to Harvard University to pursue postdoctoral research with Prof. David Liu exploring mechanisms for templated nucleic acid synthesis. In 2010, Jen began her independent career in the Department of Chemistry at the University of Utah, and was promoted to Associate Professor with tenure in 2016. In 2017, Jen and her research group moved to the Department of Chemistry at Emory University. Research in the Heemstra lab is focused on harnessing the molecular recognition and self-assembly properties of nucleic acids for applications in biosensing and bioimaging. Jen can be found on Twitter [@jenheemstra](#).

John Caldora: What should someone look for in a mentor or advisor in a STEM field? Are there particular areas where compatibility is especially important?

Jen Heemstra: *Compatibility of research interests is critically important. Beyond that, I think the most important thing to look for is someone who cares about you and your future career. Great mentors want to see you succeed, are committed to helping you throughout your career, and want to see you live out your own career aspirations, not just replicate theirs.*

It is also important to make sure that their expectations match what you want from your experience. For example, if you want the freedom to explore your own ideas, don't choose a mentor who will want to micromanage you and your project. When seeking out information about expectations, ask both the advisor and current or former members of their lab. The lab members will often give you a more accurate picture of what it is like to work in that lab.

JC: As we are in an era where news of the mistreatment and harassment of graduate students in STEM fields makes the news (such as Inside Higher Ed or The Chronicle of Higher Education) on an almost daily basis, what are some things that autistic students, female and male, who are particularly vulnerable to such harassment, can do to protect themselves?

JH: *In STEM fields, a student's experience is largely determined by their research advisor, so choosing a mentor who is supportive and respects the uniqueness of each individual is*

a key step to having a positive experience. Students can also seek out departments and universities that are mindful of inclusiveness and have systems in place to address harassment. As an example, many universities or programs have a designated ombudsperson who students can go to for help if they are in a dispute with their advisor or are being mistreated.

JC: What is a typical STEM lab environment like in terms of social interaction? Do colleagues become friends? Are they expected to engage with each other outside of work? Conversely, is it a more competitive environment, where you are expected to do what is necessary to make sure you, as an individual, succeed?

JH: *Laboratory environments vary widely, and this is another important factor to consider when choosing a program and research lab. In some labs, group members are highly focused on their own projects and interact minimally with their colleagues. Other groups are highly collaborative and group members talk with each other multiple times a day. Graduate school is stressful, so it is common for students to form friendships either with their lab-mates or with colleagues from another lab, as this support network can be helpful for persisting through the difficult times. This often leads to social interactions outside of work, but these interactions are not viewed as expected or required. It's also important to note that there is a wide variety of formats for social interactions – while parties are common, it's also common to go to the gym together for a more individual activity such as swimming*

laps. Thus, there are ways to connect with others that fit with a variety of social styles and preferences.

Graduate school can be viewed as competitive, as securing a job afterward is largely dependent on what you accomplish and are able to put on your CV or resume. However, I would argue that collaborating and helping others often makes everyone more successful, and thus competitiveness and collegiality are not mutually exclusive. In competing for jobs, you will be competing against everyone in the world, and so working together with your lab-mates or other students in your program can be greatly to your overall benefit.

JC: When on the job search in a STEM field, do you think it is to an autistic job seeker's benefit to disclose their status or not? How can they tell?

JH: *This is a very tough question with no straightforward answer. On one hand, disclosing too early could create bias that eliminates you from the competition. On the other hand, disclosing provides context that can help you have a more successful interaction with a future employer. The difference here is the attitude of the employer – whether they are looking to cut people who don't "fit in" or if they are looking to create a diverse team that respects each individual and provides everyone with the environment they need to be successful. In the end, you really want to be in the latter type of group, and thus being cut from consideration because of your status could actually be*

saving you from a toxic situation. However, you also have to contend with the reality that this ideal environment may not be an immediate option, and you need to be savvy about securing the opportunities that you need to advance your career.

Thanks again to Jen for speaking with us. If you have questions or comments about this exchange, [please let us know in the comments!](#)

For more on mentorship and autistic students, see grad student Laura Gilmour's audio interviews with her STEM mentor, [part one here](#). Faculty might also appreciate this incredibly insightful post from John: [The Accommodations Process: A Primer for Faculty](#).



Socializing in STEM Classes and Careers: Part One, Insight for Autistic Students

by Katie Matthews

Have you ever wondered what it is like socially to take STEM classes or work in a STEM-focused workplace? Students with autism are often encouraged to seek these pathways because of misconceived notions that STEM fields require less communication, people skills, or social prowess. Many STEM careers and college courses are thought to focus on “computer work” without much emphasis on the human interaction necessary for success. Oftentimes, however, collaboration with peers can be daunting at first but necessary to advance one’s studies and career. I spoke with a current STEM employee on how these social interactions helped him both in his college experience and now in his current field. In an additional post, I will dive into some tips on how to turn these important insights into practice.

Dan Matthews is a Senior Hardware Engineer in Customer Technical Service. He studied Mechanical Engineering Technology and received his Bachelor of Science degree from Central Connecticut State University. Although he is not autistic, he gives an “insider view” into STEM classes and dispels some myths of what social experiences were like in college. He also discusses interactions with his colleagues on a personal level.

Katie Matthews: Dan, did you notice any differences between your STEM classes and your core academic classes (such as English, writing, history, language arts) in terms of the amount of group projects given by the professor or social opportunities that came up?

Dan Matthews: Yes. Many of the core classes

involved individual projects and assignments, but not much group interaction. My STEM classes often involved more in-depth lessons and class participation, as well as group projects where we had to partner with two or three other classmates. Some projects even resulted in giving a presentation to the professor and the rest of the class. I also



found myself spending time with classmates outside of class, to help each other with homework or a project.

KM: Did you find that you would often see the same students in your STEM classes time after time?

DM: Yes I did. We were all [in] similar majors, and many of the STEM classes only had one or two class times offered, so a lot of the same people were in them because they were required courses.

KM: What are some benefits of making a friend who is in the same STEM class as you? How did you get to know someone who was in your class?

DM: Some benefits are that you could have someone to talk about the lesson with and potentially partner with or at least work on homework together. Sometimes they will have taken a class you haven't taken yet, so they might have a book or notes you can borrow. I got to know them from sitting near people and finding a mutual interest (cars, music, etc.) and asking them about it. Then (in a subsequent class), you would have someone you already knew on the first day.

KM: Are there many opportunities to work with other students in college on STEM course projects even though they are often computer based?

DM: Yes, there are opportunities for collaboration, even on computer-based projects. Sometimes the professor would have us work in groups on the computer, and other times we were all working separately, but we were

allowed to ask other people if you had a question. For example, many times when using Excel, someone would have trouble getting a formula to work. A friend could quickly check it out and correct the error.

KM: Switching gears to post college, what are some social expectations in your current work place? Do you spend most of your day alone at the computer? Are you expected to attend any meetings? Have you ever had to speak in front of a group?

DM: In my current position, I do sit at the computer; however, being customer support, it means talking to a lot of people. I have to not only interact with my customers (airline employees in my case), but also talk with the various other groups at work when I need to find out information. I need to be able to clearly ask what I need from them, as many of my requests are time-sensitive. Often this means calling someone I don't know or emailing a large group.

I am expected to attend meetings frequently as well. These can be in-person or online, but I find it better to attend in person if possible.

I have had to speak in front of a group many times. I will host meetings, which can include five to ten people. I also had to present at our worldwide conference last year to a group of about 300 people. Part of that event was also meeting and interacting with our customers and representing my company.

KM: What do you think might be some negatives of avoiding social situations in STEM classes or in your current field? What opportunities might someone miss out on?

DM: *Some negatives for me would be making your school or work life more difficult. It is very beneficial to bounce ideas off classmates or coworkers, as well as getting to know them more personally. After all, I sit with the same people for 40 hours a week, so I want to be friendly with them. This can also be beneficial once you are finishing school or looking to change jobs. Often your classmates or coworkers will know someone in a job that interests you and provide a connection. But if you don't talk to them, they won't know how good your work is, and it will be hard for them to recommend you.*

KM: **Did you get to work with autistic peers in college, or do you now?**

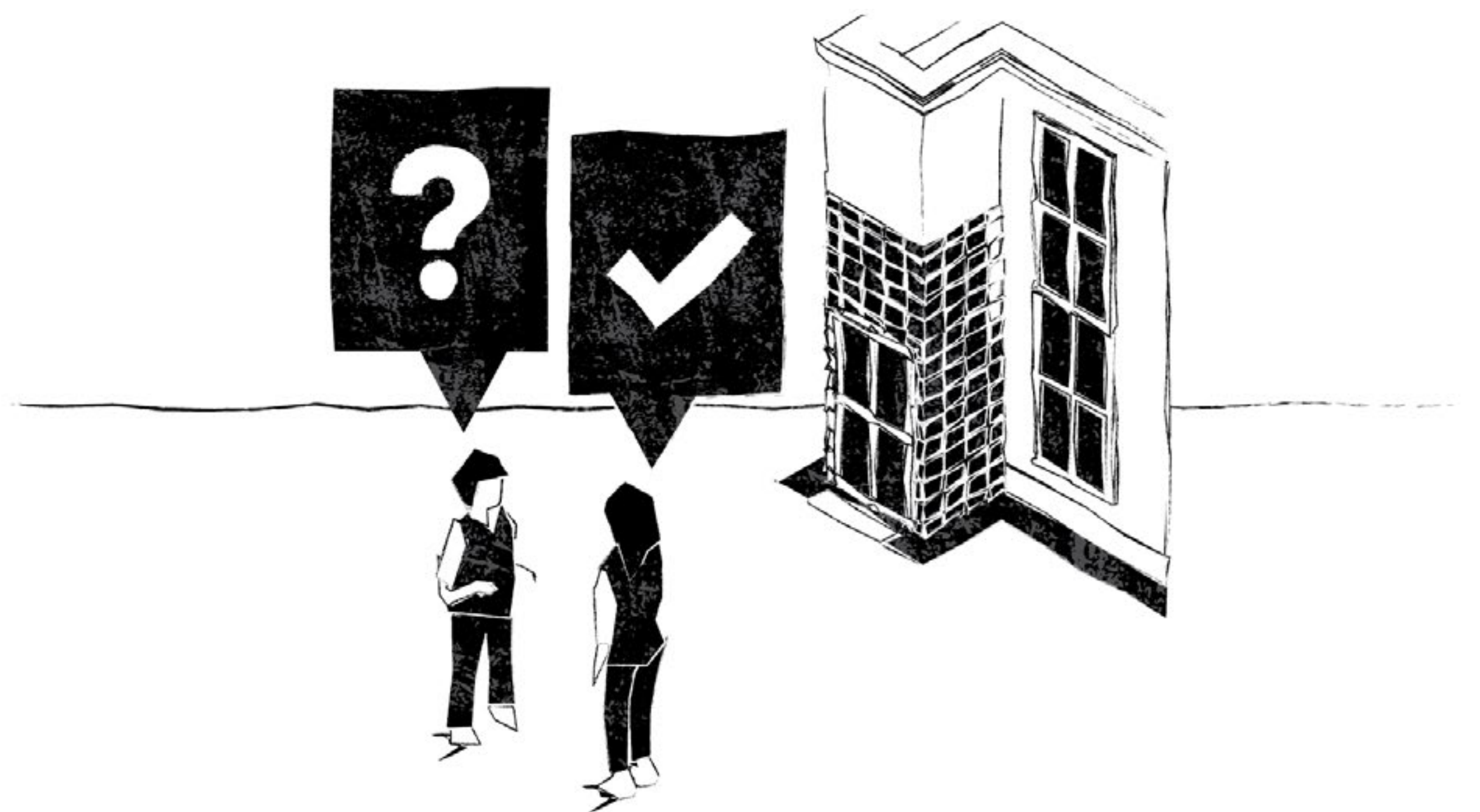
DM: *I am not aware if I happened to work with anyone in school or in my current field who has autism or is otherwise neurodivergent. At work no one would ask someone if they had a diagnosis, since medical info is protected. It would be up to the person to share their personal information if they wanted to. I know my work is usually very accommodating for people with disabilities/sicknesses/etc., so I don't think it would be an issue.*

KM: **Can you give any advice for people who are drawn to STEM because they don't feel comfortable working with people?**

DM: *I believe within the STEM fields there are positions that have minimal interaction with other people. However, it would be rare to find a job that didn't have meetings or requirements to work with coworkers on a regular basis. While at work it is up to you how much you engage with your cube-mates, for me there are some folks I have never spoken to, because they are quiet and keep to themselves. But it would still be expected they participate in meetings or have a discussion if the boss wanted to ask about work.*

Thank you again, Dan, for speaking with me! In part two of this post, I will talk about some strategies for putting Dan's tips and insider information to work!

What types of classmate and coworker interactions are you most anxious about or excited about? [Let us know in the comments.](#)



Socializing in STEM Classes and Careers: Part Two, Practical Tips for Autistic Students

by Katie Matthews

In part one of this post, we heard from Dan Matthews, a Senior Hardware Engineer in Customer Technical Service. Having attended Central Connecticut State University for Mechanical Engineering Technology, he provided some useful insight into what it was like being a STEM student and what it is like working in the STEM field now. If you're a STEM college student, how can you apply his insights to your own academic life? Read on for strategies about how to strike up a conversation with someone in a class environment and how to maintain these developing relationships, including tips on how to connect with classmates during times like lunch and other breaks

It all starts with looking for a friendly face. Many STEM courses involve group projects and difficult homework assignments. As Dan said, having someone you already know in a class can make partnering up and working together much less intimidating. But how do you make that first connection?

1. Look for a familiar face.

Do you recognize anyone from orientation, from another course, or from the library? Start by introducing yourself and reminding the person of where you might have seen them before. This will

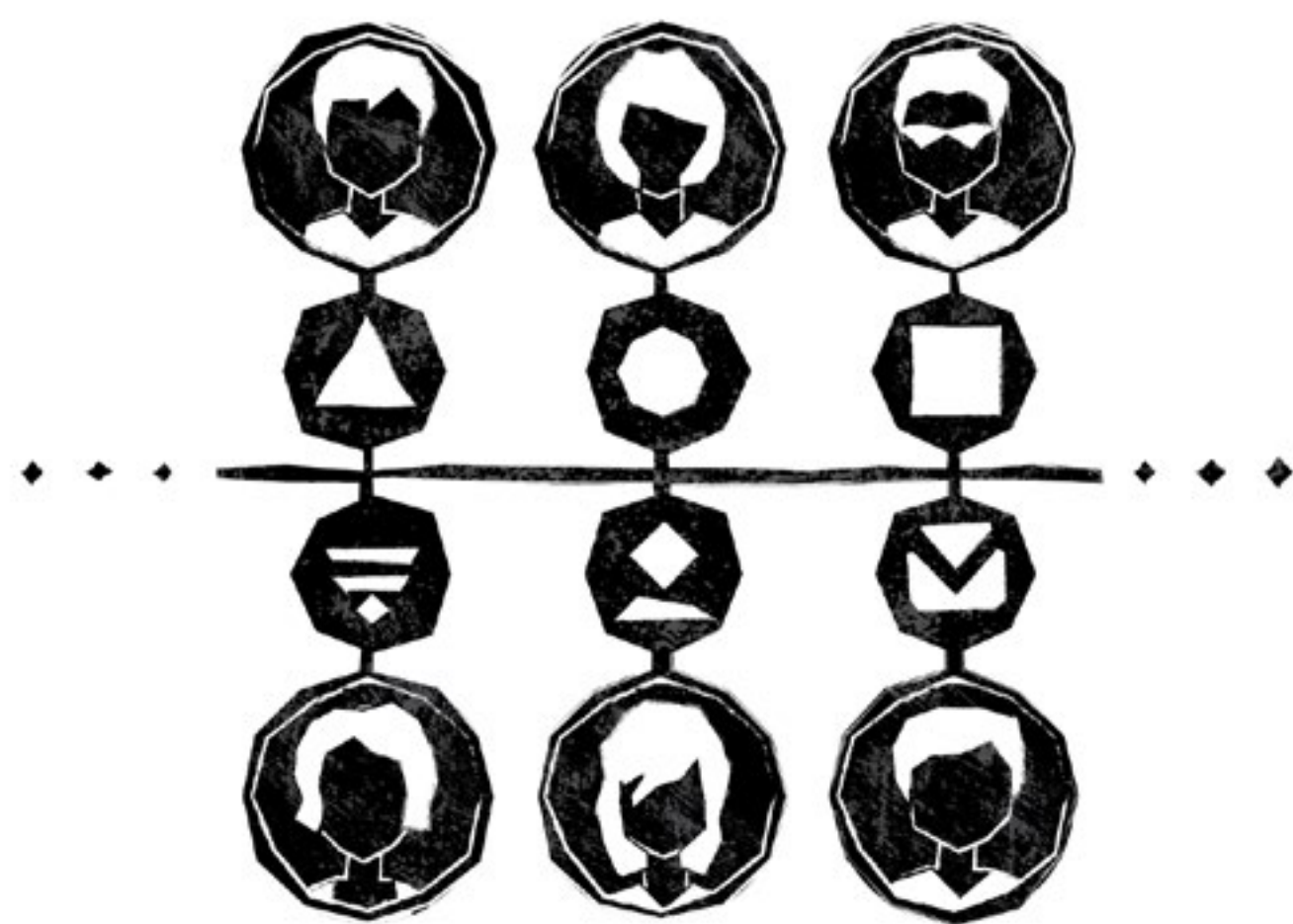
create a sense of familiarity. Joining groups on campus is a great way to increase your exposure to different students.

2. Find a mutual interest.

Sure, you both must be somewhat interested in the college course you are in together, but can you find something else in common to chat about? Try asking about what they did for fun the previous weekend, where they grew up or currently live, or what type of music they are listening to. You will be able to tell pretty quickly if the person is receptive to your questions because they will

answer with lengthier statements and ask you questions back. If they are giving you short one-word answers and looking away, they might not be interested in making a friend. I like to give other students the benefit of the doubt and assume they are also interested in making social connections in the classroom. If they do not look interested in talking, it's very likely because of something else going on in their life and not necessarily something you said. Don't be discouraged if a first or second attempt at reaching out fails—just look for the next opportunity.

3. Suggest a class-related way to get to know each other more.



For example, if there is a partnered project coming up, mention that you are still looking for a partner. If there is a challenging problem set for homework, ask whether they would like to meet in the library to work on the problem set at the same time. As Dan mentioned, sometimes something as simple as one of you being stuck on an excel formula can be a way to help each other out. If you have two classes together and there is an open window around a mealtime, ask what their plans are. Maybe getting lunch together or sitting in the study lounge to eat will provide a natural way to hang out outside of class.

4. Know that most people like to talk about themselves, and aim for a balance in the conversation, with both people talking about their interests.

Make sure to ask the other person questions and show you are engaged. Making a follow up comment that then relates to yourself is a way for them to then get to know you and have an opportunity to ask their own questions in return.

5. Remember what the classmate has said in the past and bring it up the next time you see them.

This is a concept similar to the idea of keeping a “friend file” in your brain. Friend files contain the important information about someone that you “pull up” to the front of your memory when you see them again. Did this friend mention they were going to a concert last week? Ask them how it was. Did they say they were planning on binge watching a season on Netflix? Let them know that you also watched an episode at their recommendation. If you forgot something about them, it's okay to say that and ask for a repetition too. People do not expect you to remember everything they said.

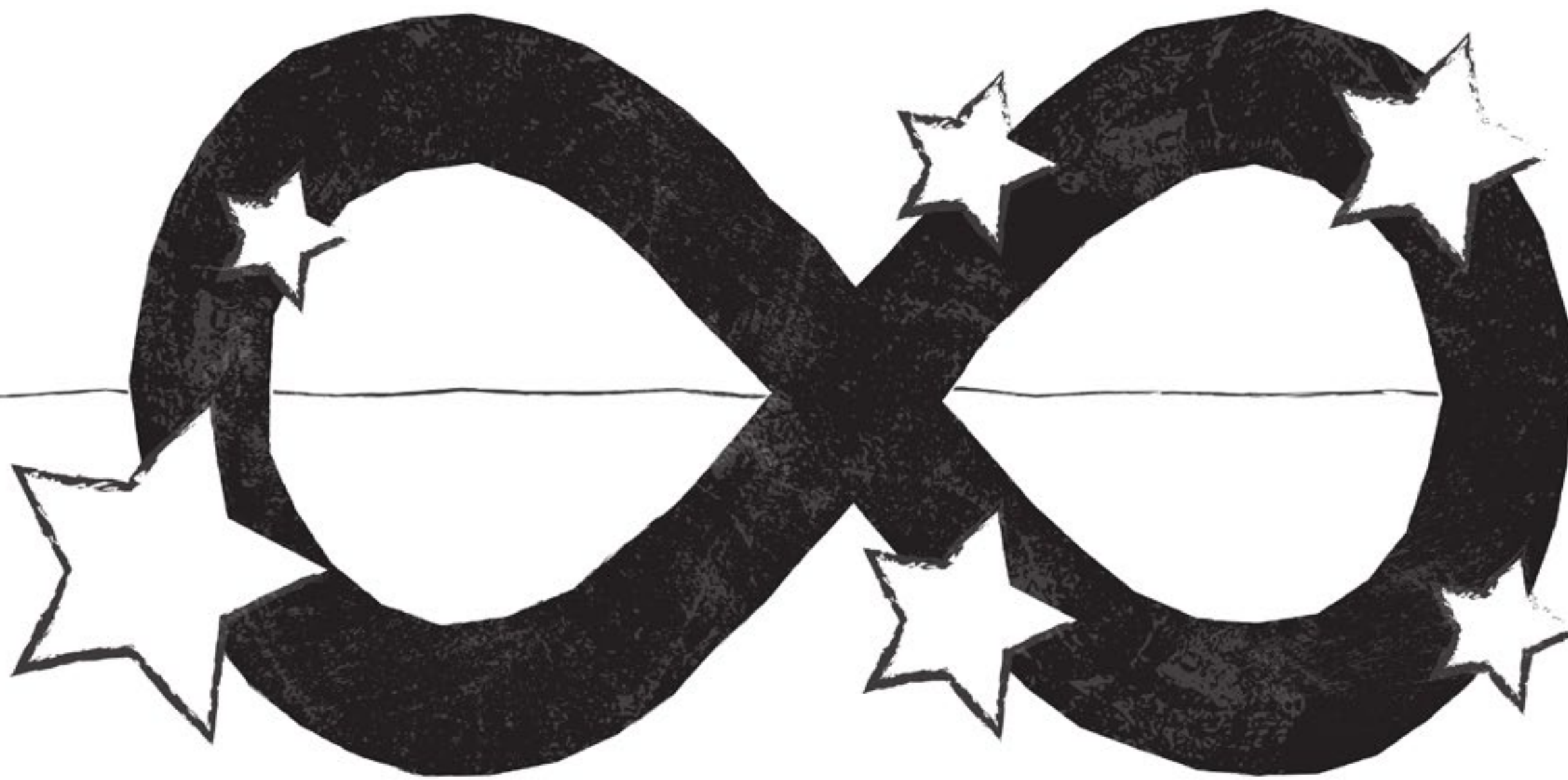
6. You can always be blunt.

If you are having difficulty connecting with your classmates organically, don't be afraid to be up front with them and let them know you are looking for a study buddy, a project partner, or someone to practice a presentation in front of. Sometimes people are more willing to help out when they know specifically what type of relationship you are looking for. Once you work on a project with someone, you are bound to get to know them a bit more, too.

7. Move the friendship to outside of the classroom setting.

Once you've found that you have known someone for a while and you have areas of common interest outside of school, it is appropriate to ask whether they want to attend an event or hang out doing something other than class work. It's a little like dating, but without the flirting. Building on these deeper connections outside of the school setting can be a powerful way to create lasting friendships that will not only bring you happiness but can end up aiding in networking and potential job opportunities in the future.

What other ways have you connected with classmates and formed connections? [Let me know in the comments below!](#)



Autistic Professional Profiles: Quality Assurance Specialist, Aerospace Engineering & Manufacturing Company

by Katie Matthews

Tyler is an autistic adult working as a Quality Assurance Specialist for an aerospace engineering and manufacturing company. While he had an IEP throughout his public schooling, navigating the college environment and workplace without such accommodations was more challenging. Here he shares some of his journey through a series of interview questions, providing important insight into what it was like for him as an autistic student using local resources and planning for his future.

Katie Matthews: When and how did you know you wanted to pursue a STEM career, and when did you decide that you wanted to go to college?

Tyler: For me, there was rarely a day in which I considered not going to college - I always really liked school and learning and wanted to build on that, making it a natural step forward from high school. As for [a] STEM career, numbers have always seemed to fascinate me.

KM: What was the college application process like for you? Where did you end up going to school and what did you study as a major?

T: I went to college at Central Connecticut State University and majored in mathematics with a specialization in statistics. As for the application process, issues came with deciding how much I was willing to disclose about my disability and finding the right school for me. My mother worked with Jane Thierfeld Brown from College Autism Spectrum to learn about the types of services that might be available to me at different schools. I applied to a number of colleges, but I decided to go with one close to home for easier commuting, as I wasn't ready to live on campus right away.

KM: What sort of classroom accommodations or help from your family did you seek out while in college?

T: For accommodations, I disclosed [my diagnosis] and met with the Disability Office, and the main [accommodations] I used for the first few semesters were alternate testing sites and extended time. I also had a private life-coach who worked with me a few hours each week on college's social aspects and looking at potential jobs. Originally, it was difficult for me to talk with professors and she helped me navigate that issue, making sure that I had my schedule organized and had study schedules in place. In my sixth semester on campus (junior year, spring semester), I moved on campus to a single dorm room. The classes I needed to take were later at night, so it made sense.

KM: What were the biggest differences for you in terms of high school workload vs. college workload and lifestyle?

T: For me, the biggest difference between high school workload and college workload was that high school had more assignments but was a lot more stable, as I was only in one building. In college (with my classes spaced apart so I generally had two per day) I had more room to work on assignments, but I was bouncing around, especially between classes that were in different buildings, and then I was also [balancing] academic life with work. Getting a place on campus helped alleviate stress as then I had a place to rest and calm.

KM: How did you prepare for the transition out of college and into the job market?

T: Right out of high school, I was working with the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services to find a job and develop work skills, and they found two prospective jobs in New Britain - one at Catholic Charities and one at the Institute for Municipal & Regional Policy (located at Central's downtown campus) - and I picked the latter. The job, though, didn't start until the summer following my freshman year. I briefly had a job coach help me with some aspects of the position, but I soon began completing my work without her. During the semester, I tended to work around ten hours per week as I also was taking four classes and had to figure out the bus system to get to work and back. My workload expanded to just under 20 hours per week during the summer.

KM: What were the most challenging parts about finding your current job and once you started working?

T: I got my current job thanks to a connection from my life coach, originally starting as an intern in my final semester of college, which would last over a year. One of the major difficulties is with transportation as I'm still working on getting my license. As for the job itself, I have difficulties approaching others for help. My exact job title is Quality Assurance Specialist, working in the quality assurance sector, inputting risk evaluations regarding the company's suppliers.



KM: When thinking about your time in college or now in the workplace, what sort of social outlets do you have and most enjoy?

T: *While in college (and even now), my primary social outlet was taking ballroom dance, which was much easier to attend in earlier semesters as I was commuting and had earlier classes so I had afternoons and evenings free. However, as college continued, it became increasingly harder to attend dance as I had evening classes that interfered. Now that I'm out of school and working, I can more easily attend and enjoy my dance lessons.*

KM: Did you ever have times you felt lonely or isolated because of having autism or for any other reasons? If so, how did you deal with that?

T: *I don't exactly feel that lonely or isolated—in fact, I generally prefer being alone or with minimal presence.*

KM: Do you have advice for other autistic students in their transition to college or even into the workplace?

T: *The advice I would give for other autistic students in the transition is to create your own path, one that may end up noticeably different than that of your peers. You need skills other than those taught in a classroom, and in order to succeed in both college and the workplace, a balance is necessary between both social skills and work skills.*

Thank you, Tyler, for sharing your path! Just as Tyler said, every journey to a fulfilling career will be different. What do you envision will be a challenging part of navigating the school to work transition for you? What can you start working on now?

For those currently working, what resources helped you succeed? At the time of e-book creation, this post was not yet officially published on the website! Let us know in the student forum if you have [questions for Katie or other members of the STS community](#).

References:

<http://www.utc.com/Who-We-Are/Pages/Global-Diversity-and-Inclusion.aspx>

<http://collegeautismspectrum.com/team/>

TIPS FROM TYLER'S MOM:

1. **Start preparing early:**

"I started attending college-prep presentations when Tyler was in middle school, learning about college expectations and how things work when a student no longer has an IEP or is no longer protected under IDEA."

2. **Try different programs, but don't be afraid to customize:**

"In the end, we kind of created our own program for Tyler for college. We have also worked really closely with the Center for Children with Special Needs and Center for Independence."

3. **Collaborating with psychologists, autism resource centers, and other professionals can lead to having a great team to work with:**

"The life coach model is also fantastic. I know it is what is offered through our state services, but the waiting list is years! We used the model but had to create our own (at expense to the family). Mom can't call the boss or check in with a professor, but the life coach can have that vocational relationship and can work with the individual to develop skills they may need to handle a variety of situations."

4. **Don't neglect the big picture:**

"We have always been pushed with our outside supports to make sure that Tyler was building the skills that he would need in order to work in addition to being able to function in the classroom. When you think about it, Tyler started school at age 3 - he was really good at 'doing school' by high school with so much practice - but his opportunities in the community and work place were much more limited. I hope Stairway to Stem encourages students and families to work on the job skills and social skills with the same focus and drive as the academic skills. I think every year school systems are moving in a better direction, but it is still a work in progress. Once you leave the IDEA umbrella, you are really on your own with such limited resources and funding."

5. **Take it slowly:**

"Tyler works for the aerospace supplier two days a week - it is hopefully moving to 3 in the coming months. [His college] has also kept him on at the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy where he works the other 3 days. So yes, he is a success story but it is different and harder than his classmates."



Thanks to Contributors Abi Hunter, Arianne Garcia, Elinore Alms, John Caldora, Justin Robbins, Kate Becker, Katie Matthews, Laura Gilmour, Patrick Dwyer, Sara Sanders Gardner, Susan Woods, and Theresa Revans-McMenimon for the content reproduced in this e-book.

Content Creator

Abi Hunter is an undergraduate at the University of Chicago currently completing her Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics jointly with a Master of Science in Computer Science. She has worked in software development for two summers. She is passionate about the intersections of formal linguistic theory and computer science, and hopes to pursue further graduate work in this field. Abi is passionate about STEM and computer science education in particular, and loves sharing her understanding of her favorite complex topics in programming and linguistics.

Editorial Board Member

Arianne Garcia is a Hispanic writer, activist, artist, and autism advocate. She was diagnosed at 25 with ADHD and autism. Unsatisfied with just educating herself, Arianne set up her own website to help others navigate the tricky communication bridge between autistic and neurotypical thinking and speaking. Arianne has written on numerous autism topics, such as Hispanics and autism diagnosis rates, hiring autistic people, suicidal ideation in autistic adults, amongst other things. Arianne's stress therapy includes sensory aides, music, and playing with Legos. Interested in her work? Visit her website: www.arianneswork.com

Content Creator

Elinore Alms is a Registered Behavior Technician in Fresno, California. She works part time as an in-home positive behavior supports provider and is a biology major at Fresno City College. In her spare time, she watches Anime and cares for her many pets.

Editorial Board Member

John Caldora, M.Ed. is a case manager who works with students of concern at a large public university in the Southern United States. He is also a member of the autism spectrum. John draws on his personal experiences as well as his knowledge of Higher Education administration to help autistic students succeed. He has spent years presenting to higher education professionals regarding best practice interventions and encouraging self-advocacy in students.

Content Creator

Justin Robbins is a recent graduate of Tufts University, having double majored in biology and history. In addition to being an advocate for other autistic people, he enjoys modern board games, great worldbuilding, and truly awful puns.

Guest Contributor

Kate Becker is a science writer in Brookline, Massachusetts. She studied physics and astronomy and was previously senior researcher for the science documentary series NOVA. Contact her at <http://www.spacecrafty.com/>

Content Creator

Katie Matthews is a part time speech and language pathologist and part time professional runner. Katie received both her Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Boston University in Speech, Hearing and Language Sciences; and Speech-Language Pathology, respectively. She also trains on the Boston Athletic Association High Performance Team. Katie has experience in public and private schools as well as private

clinic settings. She works with children and young adults with a variety of disabilities, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Katie loves to share executive functioning and planning tips along with the more traditional social language strategies to help students succeed.

Content Creator

Laura Gilmour is a PhD candidate in educational psychology at the University of Alberta and an autistic self-advocate. Her research has entered around issues surrounding autism across the life span ranging from sexuality, online gaming, employment, and autism culture. She is actively involved in guest lectures in the Edmonton community which share both her personal and research experience.

Guest Contributor

Patrick Dwyer is an autistic graduate student in the psychology department at UC Davis with a broad interest in helping to ensure that autistic and neurodivergent people can lead fulfilling lives. He plans to use eye-tracking and electrophysiology to explore the heterogeneity of the autism spectrum and different phenotypes of autism, and is particularly interested in studying sensory processing and sensory sensitivities in autism. He has also facilitated peer-support groups for other autistic college students. You can find more of Patrick's writing on his blog at autisticscholar.com.

Editorial Board Member

Sara Sanders Gardner is an autistic professional living in Redmond, Washington, near Seattle. Sara is the designer and Program Director of Bellevue College's Autism Spectrum Navigators program, now in its 8th year, serving over 200 students. Sara also consults with Microsoft's U.S. Autism Inclusive Hiring program, and leads training sessions with prospective managers and team peers of individuals hired through the program, where they discuss areas such as social justice, autism as a culture and a disability, and communication styles.

Editorial Board Member

Susan Woods, M. Ed., recently retired as Associate Dean of Student Support Services at Middlesex Community College after 27 years. Susan managed the college's Disability Support Services, supporting 1000 students with documented disabilities, as well as alternative and grant funded support programs. Susan has regularly provided training and workshops to faculty and staff on creating welcoming and inclusive environments and universal design for instruction. Her work now focuses on

professional development and training to high school personnel and families to help support the successful transition to college for students with disabilities. Her professional development website is www.susanbwoods.com.

Editorial Board Member

Theresa Revans-McMenimon, M.S., L.M.H.C., L.M.F.T. is a licensed mental health counselor and marriage and family therapist living and working in New York. In addition, she is an Adjunct Counselor for Students on the Autism Spectrum for Westchester Community College. Theresa brings her experience as a clinician and personal perspective as a parent of an individual with ASD to her higher ed position. Theresa is also an educational consultant to various families and institutions in New York.

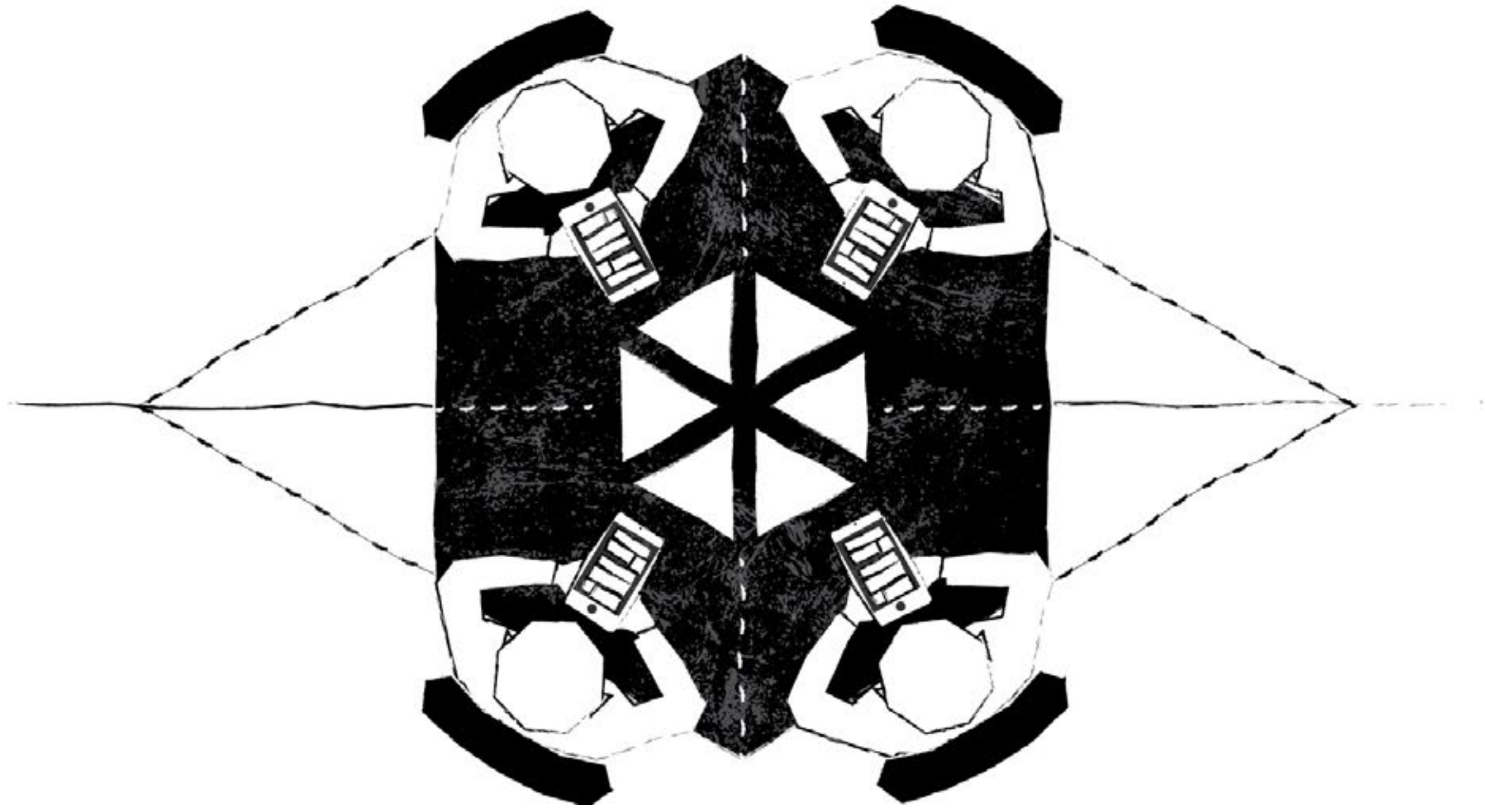
Thanks as well to the designers that contributed to the look and design of this text.
Links below for more information on their work.

Illustrations

Benjine Gerber: <https://www.graphiccouture.com/>

Book Design

Marlene Ozel: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/marlene-ozel-b7a933a8/>



We hope you found these resources helpful! Since launching in August 2018, we've added more than 80 blogs, videos, interviews and other materials to the  STS (www.stairwaytostem.org) website and our  YouTube channel.

If you haven't joined STS already, register [here](#), and consider signing up for our weekly newsletter, where you'll find content highlights and information on events and other exciting news. Plus, in our comment sections and [discussion forums](#), you can start conversations and get answers to important questions from our contributors and other community members.

We also hope you'll check out our other resources, and follow us on





Stairway to STEM is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization headquartered at 2 Haven Street, Suite 206, Reading, MA 01867.

Stairway to STEM is an online resource for autistic students, their parents, and post-secondary STEM instructors: our mission is to help students on the autism spectrum realize their capacity for success as they transition to collegiate environments and beyond, as well as to build their confidence, resilience, and self-efficacy.



Produced by Pellet Media
Copyright © 2019



This Material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1737768.

Any opinions, finding, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.