



Peer Mentoring with College Students on the Autism Spectrum



INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

College attendance used to be an unusual experience in the lives of people on the autism spectrum, but nowadays it is becoming more and more common. Dreaming about and planning for college and other postsecondary educational opportunities is being encouraged as higher education becomes an increasingly viable option. There are many reasons for this exciting change, among them: the adoption of better teaching methods and higher expectations which have led to greater college-readiness; an increased awareness among institutions of higher learning that they can and must serve more diverse students by providing appropriate aids and services; an appreciation of how college and other post-secondary experiences can be adapted creatively to fit the needs of non-traditional students and non-degree students; and an acknowledgement of the importance of college in building academic and social skills, enhancing opportunities for employment, and fostering independence and self-confidence for ALL students.

Whatever postsecondary educational goals an individual with autism may have, the support of interested, respectful, trained Peer Mentors can be of vital importance in defining and achieving those goals. Peer Mentors also enhance their own career development by building a skill set that responds productively and positively to human diversity. By modeling and encouraging diversity awareness and the development of natural supports, the activities of Peer Mentors can strengthen the overall community and capacity of the colleges and universities they attend.

This training will provide information and advice that can help you be an effective Peer Mentor. It reflects the advice and input of the real experts: people on the autism spectrum. Their college experiences are incorporated into the research base and design of this course.

What does this Guidebook Cover?

There are seven sections to the guidebook:

1. What is a Peer Mentor?
2. What is Autism?
3. How Mentors can Help with Setting and Achieving Goals
4. College Aids and Services for Students with Disabilities
5. Accessing Supports and Opportunities
6. Enhancing the Daily Living Skills Needed for College Success
7. Supporting Students with Autism to Enjoy a Happy, Healthy College Lifestyle

To help you along...

Each section follows the format below:

- Section title
- Objective
- Student Preparation
- Content
- Further Reading

Table of Contents

1. What is a Peer Mentor?
2. What is Autism?
3. How Mentors can Help with Setting and Achieving Goals
4. College Aids and Services for Students with Disabilities
5. Accessing Supports and Opportunities
6. Enhancing the Daily Living Skills Needed for College Success
7. Supporting Students with Autism to Enjoy a Happy, Healthy College Lifestyle

1. What is a Peer Mentor?

OBJECTIVE ONE: Understand **what it means to be a Peer Mentor** and what the role does and does not entail; appreciate the importance of building community and **natural supports** in the lives of people with disabilities; learn the **rules and requirements of the Peer Mentor program** you are joining

STUDENT PREPARATION: Read Section 1 of the Peer Mentor Guidebook before coming to class. Think about what you personally hope to accomplish through becoming a Peer Mentor, and be prepared to discuss briefly.

You are fortunate to have the opportunity to participate in a Peer Mentoring program through your college or university. This program will link you with a student like yourself who, in addition to having the ambition and curiosity to seek a college education, happens to be on the autism spectrum. It will train and support you so that you can, in turn, support this student to have a successful college experience. Peer Mentors not only can **make a significant difference in the lives of the students they assist**, they can **achieve a level of social awareness and interpersonal skill that is only possible through direct participation** in the process of accommodating and respecting human diversity.

The concept of Peer Mentoring is well-known and honored in education and human services. It is based on the observation that the **most effective type of guidance for people negotiating unfamiliar social environments is generally the most natural and least obtrusive**. Such guidance tends to involve the use of typical peers who already know their way around, and who can answer questions, anticipate problems, and act as models. In a college environment, a student being supported by a Peer Mentor will have the welcome opportunity to **observe and practice everyday decision-making and interactions** without attracting unwanted attention or being overwhelmed by anxiety. For many students on the autism spectrum, this opportunity can make the difference between success or failure in higher education, and between a positive experience leading to personal growth or a negative experience to be endured or ignored.

A student being supported by a Peer Mentor should not feel set apart as “different,” and the Peer Mentor should pay careful mind to treating the student fairly and respectfully as a peer. Unfortunately, this does not mean the student will not feel “different” in comparison to other students. The Peer Mentor should be aware of potential questions which may be prompted by the student, and prepare to respond appropriately and honestly. Students participating in the support program may sometimes ask if the Peer Mentor thinks they are “weird” or “different.” In these situations, the Peer Mentor might explore the diversity of college students and ask the student what being a “normal” or “typical” student means to them. Everyone has their own idea of what this entails, and asking the student to explain may help them feel more comfortable and recognize how much they have in common with others. Additionally, the Peer Mentor may share an experience in which they felt “different” and how they coped with those feelings, further suggesting that it is typical for college students to feel different at times.

A number of words have been used to describe Peer Mentors, and can be helpful to consider:

- Peer Mentors may serve as **guides**, answering basic questions about campus life, courses, professors, and how to find needed resources. Guides help the students they mentor to investigate the complex college environment without the fear of getting lost or confused.
- They may serve as **coaches**, prompting and suggesting useful courses of action to a fellow-student who is learning how to problem-solve in the college environment. Like any good coach, they might help their “trainee” to practice needed skills and prepare for important events. A coach might help a student practice how to hand their professor an “accommodation letter” and request special services, or how to interview with an employer for a job practicum.
- Another function of the Peer Mentor can be to serve as **a model**. This does not necessarily mean that the Peer Mentor should aspire to be a “role model” – that is, a person of such exalted achievement that others are encouraged to adulate them. This would be asking a lot! But a Peer Mentor can serve as a model in a more down-to-earth and realistic way, by identifying, clarifying, and demonstrating everyday skills that a new student with autism might want to learn. For example, during a simple stroll to class a Peer Mentor might point out a good place to sit outdoors and eat before class, note that students are expected to speak quietly in the hallway because some lectures are still in session, and draw attention to class etiquette (e.g. this teacher gets irritated if a cell phone rings and wants to be addressed as “Doctor”). By modeling how to follow the “unwritten rules,” the Mentor makes these abstractions visible and easier to remember.
- It is sometimes asked whether the Peer Mentor relationship should be defined as a **friendship**. Perhaps the only answer is “yes and no.” The Mentor relationship requires respect for the intellect and the differences of the person being supported, and should result at least in an amiable **partnership**. While the development of enduring friendships can never be programmed, promised, or predicted, friendships *may* emerge from the Peer Mentor relationship and continue when the formal mentoring program has ended. This is exciting when it happens, and fine when it does not; the purpose and expectation of the Peer Mentoring activity is necessarily more modest, defined, and time-limited in scope. Think carefully about the role you want in the life of the student you are mentoring; then be clear about and communicate appropriate expectations and boundaries. Remember that people with autism tend to interpret words literally and take actions seriously; it may be hard for them to tell when you are “joking around,” so avoid flirtatious or exaggerated behavior that may seem to promise more than you intended. Getting the relationship right is not difficult if you are relaxed, low key, and always respectful of the feelings of the student you are mentoring.

There are also a number of things that Peer Mentors are NOT meant to be, and that are not expected of you:

- Peer Mentors are **not “substitute parents.”** Most college students are ready and eager to take their next steps in the process of becoming more independent from their families, and you can assume that the student you will mentor feels the same. In addition, it is inappropriate and demeaning to treat a person with a disability as if they were emotionally or cognitively younger than their chronological age. As the name suggests, a Peer Mentor is supposed to behave as a peer. If you lecture, hover, talk down to, or “parent” the student you are supporting, the relationship that develops is likely to become irritating and unproductive for both of you.
- Peer Mentors are **not therapists.** The person you are mentoring may have received, or currently be receiving, any of a number of therapies (e.g. speech/language, sensorimotor integration therapy, psychological services). You may also read or hear about special therapies designed to help people with autism. It is important to remember that you do not have the training and certification required to recommend or initiate these specialized services, and that adopting the role of therapist may make it difficult to relate to your fellow student as a peer. However, there is one set of circumstances in which you may legitimately be asked to implement therapeutic activities, and that is when a Peer Mentoring program is operating under the guidance of a trained therapist, the person being mentored has expressed a wish to utilize a certain therapeutic approach to achieve a goal (e.g. he or she wants to improve body language or speech articulation), and you are being trained and supervised to carry out certain aspects of this approach. If you are entering a Peer Mentoring program that operates on this basis, you will be given specific direction in addition to the more general information in this module.
- Peer Mentors are **not support staff.** Many people with autism and other disabilities have support staff to help them accomplish activities of daily living. Support staff are generally trained and funded through human services and health care programs for which people with certain types of disabilities are eligible. Depending on the student’s needs, he or she may be accompanied by support staff for a certain number of hours a day or – if their physical, medical, and/or communication challenges are great -- round the clock. A Peer Mentor cannot substitute for support staff, or vice versa; being a guide and coach to the college world is a unique and very different role. If a student with autism who is entering college has support staff, it does not mean that a Peer Mentor won’t be needed as well.

Building Capacity Within the College Community

While the two central people in a Peer Mentor relationship are you and the student you are assisting, a successful relationship will necessarily involve **many others across the campus and the wider community.** That is because you are not only guiding, coaching, and modeling what the student needs to know and do, **your attitude and example** are showing others how to successfully relate to and support this student! If students on the autism spectrum, and all diverse learners, are to experience success in college, several key advances need to happen:

- The larger community must form **an image of each student that is positive, strength-based, and age-appropriate**;
- Faculty and students must become aware of and comfortable with different ways of communicating and socializing, and **“different ways of being in the world”**;
- The growing competencies of all community members should lead to a growing use of what are called **“natural supports”** -- the low-tech, personal, ongoing adaptations that people create in order to include and respond to each other.

There is an old saying that “If you give a person a fish, you feed that person for a day. But if you teach a person to fish, you feed them for the rest of their life.” As a Peer Mentor, you will find that many of the people a student with autism encounters need to learn how to fish for better approaches and better answers. This is the larger challenge of Peer Mentoring: you can **become an agent of change** in your college or university community, so that other students and faculty become better able to value and adapt to human diversity. Then you will **not just be solving problems as they occur, but creating a place in which they are less likely to occur.**

Here are the words of one Pennsylvania adult with autism, explaining what he wants from those who help him:

I'm not sure people with autism need therapists as a rule. They need helpers who will treat people with autism as competent with good minds and some strange sensory experiences and problems communicating... Seems to me this is not asking a lot. Dance with me. You'll enjoy the party.
 -- Matt Leonard

For Further Reading:

This useful essay by a college student with autism is available through the online publication Disability Scoop:

[Speak Up: Your Guide To Self-Advocacy](#) (July 21, 2009)

Prince-Hughes, Dawn, ed. (2002). *Aquamarine Blue 5: Personal Stories of College Students With Autism*. Swallow Press.

2. What is autism?

OBJECTIVE TWO: Learn about the **autism diagnosis**, the wide range and **variation across the autism spectrum**, the overarching importance of **getting to know the individual person**, and the role, goals and significance of **the autism self-advocacy movement**

STUDENT PREPARATION: Read Section 2 of the Peer Mentor Guidebook before coming to class.

As a Peer Mentor, you will be supporting a student with a diagnosis on the autism spectrum. But what does this mean? During the past decade, autism has been in the news a lot. It seems like there is a tremendous amount of information about autism out there, while at the same time people remain very confused. Perhaps it would be better **not to think of autism as a “thing” a person “has,”** but as an evolving explanation for the mixture of challenges and strengths that some people experience.

A Little History

In the medical world, the diagnosis of autism is **a relative newcomer**. It was introduced in the 1940s, but did not come into widespread use for several more decades. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or DSM (the guide used by doctors, lawyers, policymakers, and insurance companies to insure uniformity of language), which is periodically updated, **included autism for the first time in the DSM-III of 1980**. That edition recognized two varieties: Infantile Autism, for which the diagnostic criteria were very narrow, and a broader category called Childhood Onset Pervasive Developmental Disorder. The DSM-IV of 1994 classified all of autism under Pervasive Developmental Disorders, broadened the diagnostic criteria, and added new sub-categories: Autistic Disorder, Asperger’s Disorder, Rett’s Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and (for all those who did not quite fit the first four categories) Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified.

Diagnoses were based primarily on what the DSM termed “impairment” of social interaction skills and communication skills, and the presence of activity patterns such as “preoccupations,” “inflexible routines,” and “repetitive movements.” These categories and criteria are **expected to change again** in the next edition of the DSM. The important thing to notice is that **more people** are now likely to receive these **broader diagnoses**, and that there is nothing “carved in stone” or necessarily helpful about applying them. Many people with autism object to the **highly judgmental nature of the DSM’s language**, pointing out (for example) that communicating differently does not mean not communicating, and that one person’s “preoccupation” is another’s area of expertise.

In fact, there is **no genetic test, blood test, brain scan, or other medical technique that can be used to diagnose autism**. Diagnoses are made on the basis of observations about **the way a person learns, explores, and communicates** – and, to make matters more complicated, the behaviors being observed constantly change as a person learns,

explores, and communicates! In the end, what we call autism appears to cover such a wide range that experts in the field have remarked that there is as **much variability** among people with that diagnosis as there is between people with and without an autism spectrum diagnosis. The most important things that you, as a Peer Mentor, will need to know about the individual student you are assisting will probably be learned from that student. As one well-known self-advocate likes to say, “If you’ve met one person with autism...you’ve met one person with autism!” Peer Mentors need to recognize the **uniqueness and individuality** of the peers with whom they are working.

What We Know Now

Sound, research-based general knowledge about the autism spectrum can, however, have a useful place. We can take it as a **suggestion of the kinds of strengths and challenges that a student may have**, and as a guide to exploring good communication, learning, and support strategies. And we can explore these suggestions *with* the student we are assisting to see whether or not they agree! Here are some major points about autism on which most experts seem united:

- Over the course of nearly two decades, leading researchers in the field of neuropsychology have been gathering evidence that autism involves **differences in “multiple complex cognitive abilities related to the processing of information at higher brain levels in both the motor and sensory systems.”** (Minshew, Nancy J., G. Goldstein, & D.J. Siegel. 1997 “Neuropsychologic Functioning in Autism: profile of a complex informational processing disorder,” in *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society*, Vol. 3, 303-316).
- One implication of this finding is that students with an autism diagnosis may experience **difficulties with certain activities involving complex motor coordination**, from handwriting to speech to the ability to coordinate social cues and interactions with others. Getting their motor systems to sequence and carry out complex multi-step tasks – called **motor planning** – may be difficult and tiring.
- A person’s **sensory system may also process input differently**: sights, sounds, tastes, feelings, and smells may sometimes seem overwhelming, or sometimes may not register at all. The person **may not be receiving reliable bodily feedback** about where they are in space, or whether they are hot, cold, tired or hungry. When these perceptual processing differences exist, coping with the environment may create daily challenges: for example, sounds that most people can ignore as “background noise” may intrude and block important information, or fluorescent lights may appear to create distracting strobe effects.
- The **ability to interact easily** or effortlessly with others, and to use and pick up on body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice, is typically complicated by the information processing challenges of autism. The **social cues** needed to navigate even basic everyday encounters tend to be multiple, complex, and split-second, which can make a series of such encounters feel to the person with autism like an athletic event. For similar reasons, being asked to make abstractions from social situations (e.g. an English professor asking that students “explain how you

would feel if you were Jane Eyre”) can be a frustrating exercise. This is not the same as lacking feelings or empathy; it simply means that the expression and interpretation of feelings may work differently for different people. The old myth that people on the autism spectrum don’t care about or need relationships with others – that they prefer to be alone -- has long ago been laid to rest. We need to be aware of, and attune ourselves with, each person’s **individual ways of self-expression and social interaction**.

- Other aspects of communication may also look or sound different for people with autism. Speech may run the gamut from **fluent to dysfluent** (e.g. with stuttering or long pauses). Some people will have speech patterns and intonations that are unusual, while **others do not speak** and rely on a keyboard, voice synthesizer, or other assistive technology. For many people with autism, language use and language expectations tend to be **literal and precise**. Many self-advocates describe themselves as honest and straightforward in their communication, and express the wish that others would be the same. Shifting among various layers of meaning (as in humor, slang, or sarcasm) is possible, but for some people with autism it can represent another challenge to perceptual processing that may require extra time and effort.
- Individuals with autism often have differences in attention, or symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. They **may find it difficult to suddenly switch attention, or to transition to a new activity**. They may seem to hyperfocus on things of interest. (This tendency can be an asset in certain situations, such as an accountant who focuses intently on balancing the books.) Some individuals with autism process auditory stimuli (such as spoken speech) slower than typical speed. They may get lost if multiple directions are given at a single time, or if there is background noise that makes hearing more challenging.
- Perhaps not surprisingly, many people with autism find themselves in a state of **high anxiety** much of the time. Anxiety can affect many other aspects of life, from sleeping and health to the ability to make transitions and re-orient to changes and unplanned situations. People living with intense anxiety often need **daily routines and predictable activities** to relieve the stress. They may find it difficult to make changes or to try too many new things at once. The experience of **obsessions and compulsions** is closely related to high anxiety, and is part of the lives of many people on the autism spectrum. Obsessions and compulsions are neurological “close relatives” to the vocal and motor tics we know as Tourette Syndrome; just as with TS, drawing attention to them can strengthen their grip. However, they tend to diminish naturally when the person is engaged in some other compelling activity.
- People with autism can be excellent students with a deep curiosity about how things work. One **frequent strength is memory**, which is often visual. Many students on the spectrum have developed **intense interests** in particular subjects, in which they may become experts at an early age and maintain encyclopedic knowledge. While some students with autism are especially proficient in math and sciences, there are also many artists and poets on the autism spectrum. And there

are plenty who can't decide what to major in and spend way too much time surfing the Internet or watching TV!

It is often remarked that **none of the “symptoms” or traits associated with autism is truly unfamiliar**. We all experience some of them some of the time, and can use that personal experience to better understand and relate. It is often the **frequency and degree** to which people with autism experience things like overwhelmed senses, confusion in social situations, or anxiety, that makes a difference and calls for awareness and support.

A word of caution: Any sensory or motor experience – whether associated with autism or with some other phenomenon – is subject to **different personal interpretations** by different people. During a brain scan, two people's brains might show identical patterns of activation which a medical expert might identify as severe anxiety. However, one of those patients might report it as a distressing, frightening sensation, while the other might find the experience to be pleasantly spine-tingling. While it may be possible to observe and identify certain “symptoms” or “tendencies” that a peer with autism exhibits, that observation tells us little about the nature and quality of that person's experience and the meaning of those “symptoms” in his or her life. *It is very important for a Peer Mentor to listen, learn, and be open to understanding others on their own terms.*

The Autism Self-Advocacy Movement

Since the 1990s, autism self-advocacy has become a **strong and increasingly well-organized movement** nationwide. Self-advocates insist on being understood on their own terms, and speak of “autism pride” as an antidote to the more narrow-minded quest for an autism “cure.” They point out the many contributions that people with autism have made in various fields, and to their communities and families. The student peer whom you will mentor may or may not already be a member of a self-advocacy organization or support group. In either case, these values from the autism self-advocacy movement are likely to have a significant impact on that person's life:

- **Self-determination** – This concept has roots in both politics (the right of a people to self-determine its governance) and psychology (a self-determined person makes choices that are autonomous, not based on coercion or undue influence by others). In the disability rights movement, it means that all people should be able to **set their own goals and make meaningful choices, rather than have others decide for them** in a custodial or caretaking capacity. Self-determination is explained and embodied in the slogan: **“Nothing about us without us!”** For many people on the autism spectrum, its evolution has depended on better understanding and acceptance of the fact that there are many ways to communicate other than speech. A parallel slogan for those self-advocates is “Just because I do not speak does not mean I do not have anything to say!”

- **Autism Pride** – In increasing numbers, self-advocates on the autism spectrum are demanding that **old images and myths of autism be dismantled**, and that they be respected and accepted in their own right: not as people “suffering from” or needing to “overcome” or “be cured of” autism, but as people who are very **comfortable with their identities and their autism**. Self-advocates have launched successful media campaigns to end disrespectful presentations of autism, and have tried to inform the activities of more traditional autism organizations and obtain representation on their boards and policy-making bodies. In an interesting development, some “autism pride” advocates would like to see the current “people first” language of the disabilities rights movement (which, for example, refers to “people with disabilities” or “people with brain injury” rather than “the disabled” or “brain injured people” as a reminder that the person is not reducible to their diagnosis) abandoned, at least for autism. They refer to themselves as “autistics,” “auties,” or “aspies” (for Asperger’s Syndrome) to signal their pride in that designation. This training module will follow people-first usage because it remains the widely-accepted product of a disability rights movement that found such language to be respectful. However, its use is not meant to imply that there is only one way, or one best way, for self-advocates to refer to themselves. The student you are mentoring will let you know what types of language use he or she prefers.
- **Neurodiversity** -- The **neurodiversity movement** is closely related to self-advocacy in its aims and values. It holds that **different ways of thinking and learning should be valued** for their present and potential future contributions to the human race. Neurodiversity is a relatively new term. This citation may be its earliest published use:

“Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will prove best at any given moment? Cybernetics and computer culture, for example, may favor a somewhat autistic cast of mind.”

-- 1998, Harvey Blume, “Neurodiversity”, *The Atlantic*

As you can see, the discussion of neurodiversity and disability got its impetus from observations about how well adapted some people with autism seem to be to **computer technology** and certain types of abstract or mathematical problem-solving that are becoming increasingly important as the **information age** progresses. A famous scientist with autism, Temple Grandin, has speculated that important, potentially highly adaptive biological diversity would be lost from the human species if attempts were made to remove the characteristics of autism from the gene pool.

- **Autism as a “culture”** – Just as there is a recognized “deaf culture,” many self-advocates feel that there exists a growing “autism culture” with **its own unique way of perceiving and “being in the world,” its own forms of communication, history, heroes, ways of socializing, and shared values**. A growing number of researchers

too have found it productive and insightful to explore autism “from the inside out,” just as social scientists explore a culture. They have recognized the value of investigating the **lived experience** of autism rather than assuming the limited and dubious role of a visitor or tourist who lacks an adequate translation of what they hear and see.

For Further Reading:

Douglas Biklen (ed.), *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone*. 2005: New York University Press.

Joe Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement*. 1993: Random House/Three Rivers Press.

A Neurodiversity web site may be found at <http://www.neurodiversity.com/main.html> The 1998 Atlantic magazine essay that gave currency to the term can be found at <http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/citation/wc980930.htm>

3. How can Mentors help set and reach manageable goals?

OBJECTIVE THREE: Consider the types of **academic goals and social goals** that a student on the autism spectrum might decide to set, and establish a process for breaking down large, complex, or very generalized goals into a series of **manageable steps** to be accomplished within a **reasonable timeframe**; consider how to support the development of a student's **everyday problem-solving skills** by helping them focus on the appropriate features of the social environment

STUDENT PREPARATION: Read Section 3 of the Peer Mentor Guidebook before coming to class.

Setting Goals: Long-term and Short-term

Most of us start college with some big ambitions and goals. Maybe we want to become a top scholar in our chosen field, or move into the rewarding job about which we've been dreaming. We might want to write the Great American Novel, create a lucrative invention, or "find ourselves" and uncover hidden talents. We might also want to make lots of new friends, be sought out as a leader or expert in our favorite area of expertise, or find that "special someone" for a long-term romantic relationship. Whatever our goals, however, we soon discover that their accomplishment will take **time, patience, and planning**. None of these things will happen overnight, or automatically. It is the same for students on the autism spectrum. Sometimes, in fact, their impatience over obtaining their goals may be even more acute due to limitations that may have been imposed on students with autism in certain segregated (i.e. disability-only) school settings, and to lack of practical experience with how to set and plan for the achievement of typical "real-world" goals.

One of the key jobs of the Peer Mentor is to help the student with autism to **approach his or her big goals and ambitions through a series of practical steps** over time. This will take thought and planning, and may involve some degree of frustration. No one likes the thought of deferring any aspect of the dreams that brought them to college in the first place. However, you can help to make these smaller steps logical, meaningful, and appealing, and to reassure the student you are mentoring that you are going through this same process in your own college life.

Let's envision how it might look to break down big goals into a series of do-able smaller steps by **considering two fictional students**:

- ❖ "James" is a student on the autism spectrum. Through high school, he spent most of his school days in special education classrooms and missed out on most typical social activities and opportunities in his school. He has been looking forward to college as a place where he can finally find a romantic relationship, and when interviewed by his new Peer Mentor this is his stated goal. James is unhappy that no such relationship has emerged during his first few weeks on campus, and is eager for support in solving this problem.

- ❖ “Lisa” is a student on the autism spectrum. She has always been fascinated by paleontology, and knows a tremendous amount of information about the evolution of early life forms from dinosaurs to mammals. Her dream is to be a leader in the field and work at the Smithsonian. But she is deeply frustrated that she is sitting in “general education” courses that have nothing to do with early life forms, and was shocked to get a “C” in her first math test, since math is a subject she will need in science courses. Lisa’s stated goal is to start becoming a success in paleontology.

➤ **What can you do?**

Using these two sample student goals, **one social and one academic**, we can consider some of the problem-solving strategies that could be used to help college students on the autism spectrum to frame their issues productively and begin to move toward useful answers. Remember that this type of activity is more art than science, and depends on your ability to **listen, empathize, and model**; your **creativity**; your **common sense**; and your **willingness to seek support from others** (especially the professionals who run your school’s Peer Mentor program) when you are stuck or uncertain. Here are some ways to start:

1. Break down long-term goals into a series of specific steps.

If the goal is very large or generalized, it is important to communicate and explore it further. Get a good, clear picture of what the student wants to accomplish and why. Respect that goal and the dreams behind it!

- ❖ In James’ case, a Mentor might find that he enjoyed participating in certain extracurricular activities in high school, and might help him break down the quest for romance into a series of **short-term objectives** to develop a social life by locating and joining similar activities on campus. Once this is accomplished, the next goal may be to ask a few new acquaintances from that club or activity to join him for an independent activity, such as going out for a pizza or to a movie. If necessary, the student might be encouraged to add some coaching in social or conversational skills to the steps in this plan. The need for such intermediate steps will become more apparent – and buy-in from the student will be easier to obtain -- when the student can think them through as part of an overall, meaningful plan of action.
- ❖ Lisa may need encouragement to locate and sit down with her faculty advisor, who can help her develop an understanding of which courses she will be taking for her major and when. Understanding the **relevance of the general education courses to her desired major** may also help; if her passion for paleontology can be infused into those courses (e.g. by making it the subject of a required assignment in her Public Speaking or English Composition course) those courses will also seem more relevant. Lisa may need support to link up with a math tutor. On the other hand, she may simply need better aids and services from the college, such as longer time to complete a test or a quiet place in which to take the test. Her rights and what she must do to obtain these services will be discussed in the next segment of this course. There may be self-advocacy steps that Lisa could learn about that

would help her to feel comfortable requesting and accepting accommodations. Lisa also may want to gain some “real world” experience in her chosen field, such as joining the campus Biology Club, or volunteering to work at the university’s natural history museum. Creating a **timeframe in which some of those more motivating activities begin to happen during her freshman year** may alleviate her frustration.

2. Identify and strengthen skills that may underpin success in reaching this goal.

Take an inventory of what the student has accomplished and has going for him or her right now, then build upon it to move toward a particular goal.

- ❖ For James, it may be helpful to emphasize the **strengths and enthusiasms that he can share** in meeting and interacting with others. Are there subjects in which he could be a tutor? Does he have extensive knowledge about sports, politics, or some other topic students like to discuss? If he feels uncomfortable with his conversational skills, does he like to work out in the gym, go running, or engage in some other **social activity where conversational skills are less crucial**?
- ❖ For Lisa, does the disappointment with her math grade indicate that study habits need to be strengthened? Are there features or aspects of paleontology that could be pursued to **broaden her interest base**? For example, if modeling and drawing dinosaurs is a strength, would an art course be of interest? If the taxonomy and classification of life forms is intriguing to her, could that interest be nurtured and expanded through the study of Information Systems or Library Science?

3. If needed, re-think or re-frame the goal to reflect a lifestyle and expectations more suitable to the college setting.

This step is not about lowering expectations; it may simply involve **exploring the culture shared by young adults in college** and discovering (perhaps with a sign of relief) that it is possible to adjust a goal and make it less daunting.

- ❖ For example, James’ sense of pressure to find a serious long-term relationship may reflect the knowledge that his parents met in college and his belief that this is the expected norm. He might benefit from **doing some “research”** in which he and his Peer Mentor observe that students tend to get together in groups, to “hang out” rather than date formally, and that most students do not meet – or even intend to meet -- their life’s partner while in college. A re-framed goal for James might be to engage in regular group activities, to find companions to eat with in the cafeteria, to join the “Friday Night Film Club,” or some social activity that involves **less pressure and more fun**.
- ❖ Similarly, Lisa’s frustration over being unable to immediately pursue her deepest interest may abate if she is able to meet and interview an upper-level student in her field. It may be **reassuring to her to hear that she is on the right track**, and not wasting time. A re-framed goal for Lisa may be to concentrate on

strengthening her math and broadening her information and skill base in preparation for the upper-level paleontology courses she aspires to take.

4. If needed, redirect the student to campus supports and professional services when the student's needs exceed a Peer Mentor's time and expertise.

Know your limits. A student encountering serious academic difficulties needs to be encouraged and supported to check in with the Office of Student Diversity to re-think tutoring needs, course load, and so forth. A student who is too anxious to eat or sleep for extensive periods of time requires medical and psychological care. You can help the student you are mentoring to problem-solve before he or she reaches that point, but it is no failure – and is in fact a positive step – to **help a student identify and access campus professional services** if and when they are needed.

Futures Planning: A Helpful Tool

Futures Planning is a popular and well-developed technique for **breaking down large or very generalized long-term goals and establishing the activities, timeframes, and personal responsibilities necessary for their successful accomplishment.** It typically works backward in time through a series of graphics that allow a person and their supporters (friends, mentors, support staff, etc.) to set a major goal for the future (e.g. what do you want to be doing in X years, or upon college graduation?), and then fill in the necessary intermediate steps. It has the advantages of assigning specific tasks to specific individuals while tying them together into a **powerful visual** that allows participants to appreciate overall movement toward a deeply desired outcome.

Futures Planning is a valuable tool in the human services, is used by people with and without disabilities, and is also implemented to do strategic planning for agencies and companies. Its focus is on building **commitment to a plan that emphasizes the person's strengths, gifts and talents,** rather than a preoccupation with deficits and "what's wrong with the person." **Friends, family (if appropriate) and those who provide services** are all called upon to determine their share. Futures Planning may serve as a focus for discussions about what services should be provided by the college, and can help to clarify the activities of the Office of Student Diversity on behalf of this student. It can also serve as a focus for deciding what role you, the Peer Mentor, can best undertake. time at this point to explain and develop the possibility further.

As a Peer Mentor, you may wish to read and learn more about Futures Planning, and about a **visual tool called PATH** (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope) that can be used to help with this planning. Useful web sites are:

<http://www.ont-autism.uoguelph.ca/PATH-jan05.pdf>

<http://www2.povnet.org/kicns/path>

<http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/edi/PCP/course05e.html>

However, even without going into greater detail about this planning tool, you can adapt several important components of the PATH for the student with autism whom you are

mentoring. First, encourage the student to be as explicit as possible about the goal he or she has set, and to project a reasonable point in the future by which it should be accomplished (e.g. by the time he or she becomes an upperclassman, by graduation, etc.). To **create a useful graphic of this plan** as it unfolds, write this goal at the far right of a long sheet of paper, like the end point of a timeline. Now **work backwards from the goal**, marking meaningful points along the timeline for (as an example) becoming an upperclassman, for the start of the student's second year of college, for the start of the second semester, and for right now. Think about what **mid-range goals or benchmarks** (e.g. desirable upper-level courses accessed; activities, clubs, or societies joined; a preferred residence/living situation obtained; an internship or practicum realized; etc.) the student will wish to achieve by these points along the way, and write them on the timeline.

In the "now" section of the timeline, which should be at the far left of your graphic, ask the student to help fill in a "snapshot" of information about **where he or she is now: interests, achievements, positive things to build on, anxieties or concerns, useful people and supports** available in his or her life. This is not a time to be judgmental, only to get on record "what is." Next you can help the student consider "**What needs to happen so that you can move from 'now' toward your mid-range and long-term goals? Who do we need to enlist** to make desirable next steps happen?" Brainstorm and list very specific activities, including the people (e.g. the head of an interesting club, the organizer of the campus tutoring service, the Resident Assistant whose help is needed to create a supportive environment in the dorm) who can help make the identified activities happen. Next comes the action: What specific steps can be undertaken over the next few months, and who will do them? These commitments too need to be on your timeline. Getting started can be the hardest part of any plan, so make sure **you and the student** you are mentoring frame and commit to "**start up" actions that can be done by tomorrow and by next week.** (e.g. "Today I'll find out when the Math club meets next, and tomorrow we'll do a "dry run" to locate the meeting room. Then you will program the meeting and location into your computer's calendar.")

Having a visualization and a specific plan for what will happen over time can be very satisfying. It may help alleviate the anxiety that sets in when a student feels his or her big goal isn't being achieved fast enough, and the fear that it will never become reality at all. While it is not and cannot be a "quick fix," **building a plan with both long-term and immediate components** can be a useful way to keep on track, avoid discouragement, and demonstrate clear and measurable advances over time.

Peer Mentors should consider their personal academic and social goals they established in college. Trainers may have Peer Mentors devise their own "Futures Planning" tool to share with the students they will be supporting. If Peer Mentors have already accomplished several short-term goals necessary for their personal long-term goal, have them list those as well. The pair of students can work on progressing toward their long-term goals and discussing both obstacles and triumphs they experience along the way. This may serve as an encouraging tool for both the Peer Mentor and supported student.

Everyday Problem-Solving: Exploratory questions

Some college students will present a mentor with large, long-term goals that need to be broken down into more manageable, obtainable steps. Others, however, may present a

mentor with only short-term issues and needs to be resolved. Sometimes it is the everyday “pile-up” of paperwork, deadlines, organizational needs, and the challenge of navigating a complex social environment that leaves students on the autism spectrum tired and in need of problem-solving support.

As a Mentor, you will want to model good ways of approaching a problem rather than “doing for” the student. In the self-advocacy training offered to students on the autism spectrum, we emphasize that:

- **Self-advocacy is not about having all the answers.**
- **An effective self-advocate is one who asks the right questions.**

Many students on the autism spectrum feel shy or intimidated about asking for help, so you may need to offer encouragement. **You may need to remind the student you are mentoring that college is all about asking questions —that is how we learn!** We ask teachers about course content, about how an assignment should be done, and about the career for which we are preparing. We ask fellow students to explain a math problem, or meet us for lunch, or not play loud music while we’re studying. We ask college staff and administrators about when to register, whether we qualify for financial aid, or how to replace a missing ID card.

No one wants to waste time bringing an issue to the attention of the wrong person, or feel frustrated because their communication is misunderstood. Yet sometimes students need to re-direct or tweak their self-advocacy strategy until they connect with the answers they need. You might remember learning in Language Arts class that a good essay or report will tell the reader “**what, who, when, where, and how.**” You can assist the student you are mentoring to **build useful self-advocacy strategies around those same basic questions:**

1. What does the student need to know or to receive from others to accomplish his or her goal?

This could be anything from information about course requirements, to a request for special classroom aids, to better understanding of his or her sensory needs. Work with the student to **name and describe the “ask” clearly.** Help the student to be clear about what a good solution would be. Suggest that they try writing down or typing a statement of the issue until they are sure of the words they want to use. Some students find it useful to rehearse an important interaction, such as requesting that a teacher allow them extra time on tests, just as they might rehearse a job interview.

2. Who is most likely to have what the student needs, and to have the power, knowledge or ability to provide it for him or her?

Whether the student needs less noise in the dorm or help organizing an assignment, identifying and approaching the right person is important. Work with the student to **find out who is in charge or is most likely to be knowledgeable and helpful.** If necessary, remind the student to **try the simplest and most direct solution first:** for example, if he or she doesn’t know how to begin an assignment it may be very useful to ask members of

their study group or contact the professor, but less useful to complain to the head of the department or the person in charge of their dorm.

3. **When is it most effective and appropriate to raise an issue?**

The student may need guidance to identify: When is it okay to interrupt someone, and when is it better to wait? When is it acceptable for the student to draw attention to his/her own feelings and opinions, and when is it considered impolite or disruptive?

Work with the student to approach people when they are able to give their full attention, rather than when they are multi-tasking or interacting with someone else. If needed, help the student to identify the social cues that will allow them to raise an issue at the most opportune moment.

4. **Where is this type of question or need typically addressed?**

The student may need guidance to decide: What issues should be raised in class, in the teacher's office after class, in the dorm or student lounge, etc.? Should a subject be discussed in private, or should it be discussed in public?

If needed, advise the student about choosing a place where the other person will feel comfortable. For example, their professor might not want to have a long talk while standing in a busy hallway, but he or she might offer a generous amount of time if the student makes an appointment to visit their office.

5. **How do college students typically express themselves in different informal and formal situations?**

The student may need guidance to identify and decide: How much detail and background about yourself and your autism should you give when you interact with others?

It may be useful to discuss and point out that **what is appropriate and fun in the informality of a cafeteria or dorm might be considered rude or disruptive in a classroom setting.** Professors also differ in how formal or informal they expect students to act (for example, some are happy to be addressed by their first names, while others expect to be called Dr. ____). Whether (or how much) to tell others about one's autism is a big question for many self-advocates, and there is no single right answer.

If the student you are mentoring has had difficulty resolving an everyday problem or issue, help them to reconsider what, who, when, where and how. It is possible that the way they are framing the question needs to change before they can connect with the right answer. Remind them that it is always appropriate to **ask someone they trust**, such as a mentor or friend, support person, or counselor, to help them think through and refocus their problem-solving strategy.

For Further Reading:

Harpur, J., Lawlor, M., and Fitzgerald, M. (2005). *Succeeding in College with Asperger's Syndrome: A Student Guide*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Lawson, W. (2003). *Build Your Own Life: A Self-Help Guide for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Useful information for making vocational plans and choices:

Grandin, T., Duffy, K., and Attwood, T. (2004). *Developing Talents: Careers for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome and High-Functioning Autism*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

4. What role does the college play in providing aids and services for students with disabilities? What can a Mentor do to facilitate this process?

OBJECTIVE FOUR: Understand the **rights of college students with disabilities under the ADA and Section 504**, the **appropriate auxiliary aids and services** that might be used by students on the autism spectrum, the issues surrounding **self-disclosure**, and how to help a student being mentored to secure needed services; understand the importance of and how to help overcome challenges to the use of the **accommodations letter**

STUDENT PREPARATION: Read Section 4 of the Peer Mentor Guidebook before coming to class. Visit your college or university's web site, and review any information posted about admission of and services for students with disabilities.

The student you are mentoring will almost surely have certain **rights to aids and services** under federal legislation designed to prevent discrimination. It is important for you to have some basic understanding of these rights for two reasons:

- The student with autism may not be utilizing these rights **optimally**; you may wish to help the student to investigate whether **more or different services** are needed.
- The student with autism may **not be accessing** the aids and services to which he/she is entitled due to concerns or **fears about the self-disclosure required** to obtain them.

This section of the training will provide both an overview of the rights and responsibilities of college students with disabilities, and of the meaning of self-disclosure.

A. Rights of Students with Disabilities

These two pieces of federal civil rights legislation are crucial to college students with disabilities:

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

- Section 504 **requires all higher education schools that receive funding from the U.S. Department of Education to provide educational auxiliary aids** to qualified students with disabilities.
- Section 504 **can apply to colleges, universities, and postsecondary vocational education and adult education programs.**
- The U.S. Department of Education's **Office of Civil Rights enforces Section 504** regulation. Failure to provide auxiliary aids to students with disabilities that results in a denial of a program benefit is prohibited as discriminatory.
- Section 504 **also prohibits colleges from: limiting the number of students with disabilities admitted; excluding a qualified student with a disability from any**

course of study or counseling them toward a more restrictive career; **discriminating in giving out financial assistance**, scholarships, internships, or assistantships; **failing to provide accessible campus housing**, or establishing any policies that have an adverse effect on students with disabilities.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):

- **The ADA prohibits state and local governments (i.e. public entities) from discriminating on the basis of disability.** It applies to these aspects of public colleges and universities: **buildings and facilities**, which must be accessible; **campus housing**, which must accommodate students with disabilities yet be comparable to and priced no higher than that provided for students without disabilities; **programs and their benefits**, which cannot be denied through failure to provide needed aids and services; and **employment policies**, including student jobs, which cannot discriminate against people with disabilities.
- The **Department of Education enforces Title II of the ADA in public colleges, universities, and graduate and professional schools.** Under Title II, failure to provide auxiliary aids to students with disabilities that results in a denial of a program benefit is prohibited as discriminatory.
- **Private colleges are not covered by the ADA;** however, since almost all private colleges receive some forms of federal funding they are covered by Section 504.

If a school or college is both a recipient of Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education and also a public entity, the institution is covered by both laws. Most colleges are covered by one or both laws, but **if a college is both private and receives no federal funds it will not be covered by either law.**

B. How to obtain auxiliary aids and services

Has the student you are mentoring successfully applied for and received the aids and services to which he or she is entitled? Here is how the process works:

All postsecondary educational institutions covered by the ADA, Section 504 or both will have an office to approve and coordinate these services. Some schools call it the “Office of Student Diversity”; others use names such as “Office of Disability Services.” (For ease of reference, this document will refer to it as the Office of Student Diversity.) These Offices may offer counseling, tutoring services, mentoring programs (like the one for which you have volunteered), and other useful supports. The student you are mentoring will want to have a good relationship with your school’s **ADA and/or Section 504 Coordinator**, because they are the people who will be helping him or her through the process of securing auxiliary aids and services.

The student will be required to **document** his or her needs thoroughly. For a new student, the college will require, at a minimum, his or her most recent evaluation report (with diagnosis) and Individual Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 plan. (If the student did not receive special services in school, or if the student is an older adult returning to school, he or she may need to present a recent evaluation from a licensed medical or psychological professional.) **The ADA and Section 504 define disability as any**

physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities such as caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, or working. Not everyone with a disability meets those criteria and is protected.

C. Types of auxiliary aids and services

Students with disabilities need to acquaint themselves with the range of aids and services that might be implemented. They are **responsible for knowing what aids and services they want, and specifically requesting them**. If the student you are mentoring is still thinking through this process, help them to consider: what aids and services have I used before (in the high school classroom, in a job setting, at home or elsewhere) that helped me to overcome barriers and to learn? Were certain aids and services listed on my IEP, or provided by my employer? Have I ever received an evaluation from a psychologist, occupational therapist, or other professional who recommended certain support services?

Below are some examples of the **technologies, accommodations, and other supports that students with different types of learning and communication needs might require** to benefit from attending college:

1. Tape recorder/recording devices for lectures
2. Note taker
3. Textbooks on tape
4. Lecture transcriptions
5. Sign language interpreters
6. Preferential seating
7. Assistants for laboratory course work
8. Accessible work station
9. Enlargement of handouts
10. Copies of handouts before class meeting
11. Use of spell checker/word processor/dictionary/calculator or talking calculator for in-class assignments
12. Assistive or augmentative communication technology, voice synthesizers
13. Open and closed captioning, closed caption decoders
14. Braille calculators, printers, or typewriters
15. Television enlargers
16. Specialized gym equipment
17. Videotext displays
18. Reaching device for library use
19. Calculators or keyboards with large buttons
20. Raised-line drawing kits
21. Assisted listening devices
22. Telecommunications devices designed for deaf persons (if telephones are provided in dorm rooms, a TTY in your dorm room)
23. Equipping school computers with screen-reading, voice recognition or other adaptive software or hardware
24. Arranging for priority registration
25. Reducing a course load

26. Substituting one course for another, provided that this does not substantially alter the required content of the program
27. Priority housing (e.g. single room rather than roommate)
28. Waiver from mandatory food services plan

Auxiliary Aids and Services for Testing

1. Extended time for tests
2. Reader for tests
3. Oral response to test questions
4. Scribe to record test responses
5. Alternate test setting
6. Alternative test formats
7. Test enlargement
8. Use of spell checker/word processor/dictionary/calculator
9. Substitute measure for verbal class participation
10. Take-home written assignments as a substitute for in-class writing

These lists are **not exhaustive; there may be other supports** that a student requires. Self-advocates with autism who helped to develop this training most frequently cited the importance of a reduced course load, extra time for testing or assignments, alternative testing formats, differentiated instruction (i.e. having materials presented in a variety of ways to suit different learning styles), tutoring (including help with time management and study skills), and environmental adjustments (such as being provided with a quiet study carrel and special lighting).

If the student is not sure whether or what services he or she might need in college, urge him or her to obtain a thorough evaluation and discuss the results with the evaluator. In general, **colleges and universities will agree to an aid or service as long as it does not lower or substantially alter the content of a course or the fundamental nature of a program of study.**

D. Challenges and limits to the rights of college students

The student you are mentoring may find that college is very **different from high school**, and that college students with disabilities have fewer protections, less oversight, and greater personal responsibility than they did in high school. Here are a few facts to keep in mind, and to review with the student if needed:

1. **While there is an entitlement to a “free and appropriate public education” (through age 21) for all students with disabilities under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), there is no overall entitlement to a college education.** Colleges may set prerequisites, reject applicants, or dismiss students who do not succeed.
2. **Students are responsible for self-disclosing the existence of a disability, and for providing diagnostic testing to verify that disability.** The college will not provide or pay for testing to create this documentation. Based on the information a student provides, the college will decide whether he or she is eligible for services

and supports under the definition of disability found in the **Americans with Disabilities Act and/or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.**

3. **The student is responsible for knowing which auxiliary aids and services he or she needs**, and asking for them. Unlike in high school, if that student cuts class, skips assignments, or experiences difficulty, **no one is required to find them, investigate the problem, or assure that they progress.**
4. **Therapies such as Speech-Language or Occupational Therapy are not provided.** If a student wishes to receive them, he or she must arrange for them on their own or through the agency that provides their support services.
5. In high school most students with disabilities had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) created by an IEP Team that included parents. **In college there is no IEP and no IEP Team; college and teachers are not permitted to disclose college records to a student's parents.**

NOTE: Some students with autism are EXCEPTIONS to the above rules.

Some students on the autism spectrum – although still a small minority -- attend college with their IDEA rights still in place. That is because **they are between the ages of 18 and 22, have not graduated from high school, and their school districts have entered into special arrangements with local colleges or other postsecondary schools to address part or all of their IEP goals.** If they are able to access the college curriculum without substantial modifications of content, they can receive college credits; if content must be significantly modified they will be evaluated in other ways by their high school instructors. Most college students on the spectrum, however, will have graduated from high school and/or aged out of IDEA entitlements. If they are in a typical college program they will have non-discrimination rights under ADA and Section 504, just as students with other types of disabilities do. However, **some adult service providers and vocational rehabilitation agencies create alternative programs based in colleges, utilizing college resources and sometimes including their clients in regular college classes.** Such “non-traditional” students will be covered by a combination of rules and rights reflecting the resources and missions of both the service-providing agency and the college: for example, therapies and 1:1 personal support may be provided, and parents may be part of the team that creates the adult’s Individualized Habilitation Plan (IHP).

E. Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure means that a person **shares some amount of personal information about himself or herself in a way that will help them reach their goals.** It should be a **positive process** that enables others to understand them better, and that gives them more – not less – control over their situation.

The student you are mentoring may not be receiving needed aids and services because he or she did not disclose the required information to the Office of Student Diversity. Or the student may have been approved for certain aids and services, but failed to disclose this information to the faculty members who need to provide it. **One of the most important roles that a Peer Mentor can play is in supporting a student to self-disclose appropriately,** and making sure that the process is as friendly and non-intimidating as possible.

All people, with and without disabilities, self-disclose in a variety of situations. For example, a job applicant might disclose in an interview that he has a child whose medical needs will occasionally cause him to arrive late for work. Disclosing this information will allow the job applicant to negotiate a more flexible schedule, and avoid getting a bad reputation as a lazy and unreliable employee. Most people on the autism spectrum will find it to their benefit to self-disclose information about their diagnosis and needs at various times during their college careers. While some students find this easy to do, others feel uncomfortable talking about themselves and their autism. Self-advocates must understand that **their college and their teachers are not required to provide any aids and services unless they have self-disclosed the existence of a disability, and provided diagnostic testing to verify that disability.** The more clearly they can explain their needs, the more likely they are to be supported and successful.

Once a student is approved by a college or university for certain aids and services, he or she is given **“accommodation letters” that must be personally delivered to each faculty member** from whom the student is taking a course. **Often this is the point where the system fails for a student with autism.** The student

- may not know how to approach the teacher or handle the interaction
- may be afraid that the teacher will react negatively
- may feel embarrassed and/or extremely anxious.

If this is the case, you can support the student by **role-playing delivery of the accommodation letters and rehearsing a basic conversation script.** Help the student select an appropriate time and place to approach his/her teacher. You may need to take all the details and “what if’s” of the situation into consideration before the student begins to feel comfortable. Remember that many students with autism are good visual learners, so helping them form a mental picture of how the interaction will unfold may be very useful.

Some students with autism have failed to turn in their accommodation letters because they imagine that they are asking for an **unfair advantage.** If that is the issue, remind him or her that no one expects a student who is blind to succeed without texts in Braille, and no one expects a student in a wheelchair to get to class without appropriate ramps and doors. The aides and services needed by students with autism are just as **reasonable and important.** All college students often need accommodations, such as an extension on a research paper or extra help studying for an exam, due to extenuating circumstances that inevitably arise. When students disclose the situation to their instructor in a timely way and ask for these services, they are advocating for themselves in a reasonable and appropriate manner.

The student you are mentoring may also want to think about the different types of self-disclosure that are needed in different settings. Author and self-advocate Stephen Shore describes self-disclosure as being either “hard” or “soft.” **A “hard” disclosure means that the person with autism talks about their diagnostic label and goes into detail about what it means to be on the autism spectrum.** That is the type of information a student will need to provide to the college’s Disability or Diversity Office to establish their right to auxiliary aids and services. **A “soft” disclosure limits the information a person gives to their immediate, relevant need.** For example, if a student is hyper-sensitive to noise they might tell that to their study group and ask that the group pick a quiet place to

meet; it probably is not necessary to give them an explanation of autism or of their diagnostic history.

The student you are mentoring may seek advice to decide which category is appropriate for different people he or she meets in college. Not everyone will need or want to know everything about them or about autism. It is vitally important for students to let the college and their teachers know about their needs so that they can be accommodated, but it is not necessary to disclose personal information to casual acquaintances. **Beyond the mandatory self-disclosure needed to acquire aids and services there are no definite rules**, and each student is free to make the choices that work best – and feel most comfortable – for them. Remember that **the student with autism is always in charge** of those choices, and that it is not appropriate for a Peer Mentor to disclose anything about a student’s diagnosis or needs without their permission.

For Further Reading:

Sibley, K. (2004) "Help Me Help Myself: Teaching and Learning" in Stephen Shore. *Ask and tell: Self-advocacy and disclosure for people on the autism spectrum*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

Willey, L. (1999). *Pretending to Be Normal: Living with Asperger's Syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

For further information about the rights of college students with disabilities, the Office of Civil Rights offers: “Auxiliary Aids and Services for Postsecondary Students with Disabilities: Higher Education's Obligations Under Section 504 and Title II of the ADA.” You may obtain a copy at <http://www.ed.gov/ocr/docs/auxaids.html>

5. Where and how can Peer Mentors help students with autism locate and access campus supports and opportunities?

OBJECTIVE FIVE: Identify the range of **academic, vocational, social, and health-related supports and opportunities available** found on college campuses; consider when and how a student with autism could access and benefit from them

STUDENT PREPARATION: Read Section 5 of the Peer Mentor Guidebook before coming to class. Visit the sections of your college or university's web site that describe student services (academic support, employment, social and recreational, health, etc.).

Students on the spectrum need what most incoming students need: an **orientation to campus, help to find their classes**, and enough demonstrations and rehearsals to make them confident they will not get lost. They will have some needs for **specialized services**, as well as the need to identify and access **typical campus activities** that suit their interests. A Peer Mentor can be an invaluable part of this process.

A. Supports and Opportunities for Students with Disabilities

We have discussed the basic services that the Office of Student Diversity (OSD) must make available to students with disabilities. Many of these offices offer much more:

- While the student with autism will not be assigned a formal planning team like the IEP team in high school, he or she can often **obtain a counselor** through that Office. A counselor can help the student stay on track and answer questions about how college works, but it will be up to him or her to make and keep counseling appointments.
- The OSD **may offer helpful speakers and workshops** on topics like “Study Skills” or “Time Management.”
- **Some Offices have developed free tutoring services and Peer Mentoring services.**
- **Some Offices organize social events and support groups** to help students get acquainted with each other and find companionship on campus.
- Some Offices have made a commitment to **help students develop their self-advocacy skills** – they may even be offering a self-advocacy course as a companion to your Peer Mentor training.

B. Supports and Opportunities for All Students

Campuses also have a variety of supports, opportunities, and resources that typically are available to ALL students, including:

Academic supports

- Academic advisors, to whom all students are assigned
- Study groups and study labs
- Student-to-student tutoring programs
- Clubs based on departmental major (e.g. the Math Club, the Marine Biology Club), which may sponsor speakers, events, and discussion groups
- Career services, to help students find employment
- Internship, “co-op” and practicum experiences (which may be required as part of a field of study)

Health supports

- Campus care and counseling services for students with psychological or health care needs
- Exercise groups (many campuses offer free use of gym equipment, a pool, etc.)
- Organized sports, including noncompetitive activities such as dance or yoga

Social supports

Most college campuses are “activity-rich” environments. As one self-advocate recalls, “Extra-curricular activities were my salvation. They were the best part of my college experience.” The student you are mentoring may wish to consider what he or she can join, attend, or even start. Here are some possibilities:

- Clubs and interest groups (e.g. that meet to play video games or go hiking)
- Support groups (e.g. a group for self-advocates on the autism spectrum). If no support group exists, you and the student you are mentoring may decide to ask the Office of Student Diversity for help in starting one. Some self-advocates have suggested that participating in such a group during their college years would have significantly enhanced their experience.
- Opportunities to perform (music, drama, poetry recitals, etc.) or attend performances
- Campus faith communities (organized worship, discussion groups, activities)
- Service clubs and volunteer activities (the student’s efforts will be appreciated, and the experience will look great on his or her resume). Some self-advocates have stated that tutoring others in their own favorite subjects was a very rewarding activity.
- Campus political groups (young Democrats, Republicans, Independents, Greens, etc.)
- Regular activities organized by the college to provide ways for students to socialize and network, such as a “Fall Festival” or a weekly movie series

As appropriate, encourage the student you are mentoring to use services and participate in activities that can support their academics, health, and social life. Most of them are free to join. Most colleges display information and answer questions about campus activities:

- At the start of the school year, when students arrive on campus to register
- During the school year, through an information office in the Student Center

If the student you are mentoring is not sure what to try, you can help him/her conduct an investigation: Observe where and when students seem to congregate in their free time, and note what they seem to enjoy doing. Self-advocates who contributed to this training have suggested joining a film society, playing table tennis, playing chess, doing photography, joining the International Club, joining a foreign language club, attending football games, eating out with friends, participating in student government and in political activities and rallies on campus, volunteering at a radio station, working on a campus newspaper, and participating in music groups. This is only a small sample of the potential activities available.

C. Residential Opportunities

For students who will be living on campus rather than commuting from home, the prospect of having a room of one's own, without daily parental oversight, is very exciting. However, for many students that opportunity also **involves learning to share with a roommate**. Freshman students are generally assigned a roommate and, while some colleges make an effort to match students according to their major or their interests, most do not. Students on the spectrum sometimes wind up with roommates who become good friends, but most new students (with autism or not) tend to change roommates by their second or third semester, suggesting that their first experience is not usually ideal.

As a Peer Mentor, you may be called upon to help resolve **debates that arise between roommates** over issues such as sharing space, respecting different sensory needs and tolerances, respecting different sleep and study schedules, and so forth. Remember to help the student reach out to **Resident Assistants in the dorms, and counselors in the Office of Student Diversity** if he or she is experiencing significant long-term problems with dorm life.

D. Vocational Opportunities: internships, “co-ops,” practicums

At many colleges, **real-life job experiences** – often called an internship, co-op (because it involves a cooperative arrangement between a college or university department and a local employer) or a practicum (as when a “student teacher” practices new skills in a real classroom, with supervision) -- are required or strongly encouraged to help a student get ready for the job world.

Some students with autism find it daunting to leave the relative safety of the campus for a supervised job experience, and may seek the advice and support of a Peer Mentor. Here are some suggestions that may help you be an effective Mentor to a student planning for a job experience:

- **Encourage the student to communicate candidly with their teacher, faculty advisor, or whoever will oversee their job experience, and to self-disclose enough information** about their autism for them to help. Be sure the student knows **what type of information to supply to supervisors** at the organization or company where they will be working. If the student will need job accommodations, the Americans with Disabilities Act offers certain protections, but these need to be considered before their job begins.

- Be clear that this experience **counts toward the student's grades and graduation**. If he or she will be tested and graded while on the job, any **auxiliary aids and services to which the student is entitled should be supplied**.
- If the student will be undergoing an interview to obtain this job experience, remind them that all students can **benefit from practicing "mock" interviews with potential employers**. If practice in interviewing is not scheduled as part of the student's training, encourage the student to practice interview skills with you. If possible, make a video tape of the student answering potential interview questions. View the video tape with the student you are mentoring and help them to consider how body language and verbal mannerisms may affect a potential employer's opinion.
- If the student will be undergoing an interview by a certain employer in the community, or by a faculty member for a volunteer or work-study position on campus, encourage the student to **research all they can about that company or faculty member**. For companies, this is easily done on the Internet. To research the work of a college faculty member, the student can look up papers authored by that person through Google Scholar. Remind the student you are mentoring that employers like to hire people who show an interest in their company or their area of research.
- If needed, discuss and rehearse the basics of job etiquette with the student you are mentoring. Remind him or her that the **rules on how to act, speak, and dress are stricter on most jobs than the rules of classroom etiquette**.
- If the agency or company at which the student will be working has **written rules about the dress code and conduct expected, help the student to review them carefully**. If there are no or few written rules, you may be able to work with the teacher overseeing the student's work experience to **identify the "hidden rules."** Make a list that the student can study and follow.
- Be sure that the student you are mentoring understands that, when it comes to a job experience, **showing up and being on time is NOT optional**.
- Internship, co-op, and practicum experiences **take time and energy, and involve a lot of sensory stimulation**. Be sure the student prepares and **"budgets" for the extra stress** – for example, by taking a lighter course load. Encourage and support the student to relax and decompress.

For Further Reading:

Grandin, T., and Barron, S. (2005). *The Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships: Decoding Social Mysteries Through the Unique Perspectives of Autism*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons.

Newport, G. (2001). *Your life is not a label: A guide to living fully with autism and Asperger's Syndrome*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons

6. How can a Mentor support a student to identify and enhance the daily living skills needed for college success?

OBJECTIVE SIX: Consider ways to support students with autism in enhancing **daily living skills** that are vital to college success: effective verbal and nonverbal communication strategies, awareness and care of personal appearance, study skills, time and money management, and personal safety and security

STUDENT PREPARATION: Read Section 6 of the Peer Mentor Guidebook before coming to class.

A. Effective Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

Whether the student you are mentoring speaks by making sound waves with his/her vocal apparatus, or speaks by using an assistive or augmentative device or other support techniques, the college environment will call for ongoing attention to communication skills. People with autism have different degrees of comfort and proficiency in this area. The following are some general tips:

1. **As needed, help the student with autism to observe the behavior of other students** to determine what is expected. For example, do they raise their hands and wait to ask questions during a certain class, or does the teacher expect them to just speak up? Do students use their cell phones in some parts of the library but not in others?
2. If the student is unsure what is appropriate or expected, support him or her by answering **specific questions about the “hidden curriculum”** (i.e. the unwritten social “rules” that govern how people behave in a particular class or situation).
3. **Try role playing social interactions** that the student finds difficult.
4. You may need to remind the student that other **people won’t necessarily know what they are thinking until they are told**. Some people with autism have said that they frequently have to remind themselves to stop and put their rapidly-moving thoughts into words.
5. If necessary, remind the student to **communicate “the good stuff”** and not just the stuff they need to complain about or correct. Help them to identify positive subjects of conversation, such as complimenting a classmate on solving a tough math problem, or telling their teacher when they have really enjoyed a class.
6. **Try using visual reminders of social skills**. For example, the student might want to post a reminder in the front of his or her notebook if the goal is to monitor speech volume.
7. **Help the student to be aware of and monitor his/her stress level**, and to avoid too many social interactions when stress is high.
8. **Help the student to locate quiet, safe places on campus** where he/she can go to decompress before returning to interactive situations.
9. If necessary, help the student keep track of how many times he/she offers input or asks questions in class or study group; remind them to **give others a turn**.
10. Model and emphasize the skill of waiting patiently and **not interrupting** while others are communicating, unless it is an emergency.

11. **Promote basic good manners:** simple words like “please,” “thank you,” and “excuse me” become especially important in crowded situations where people who don’t know each other well must get along.
12. If appropriate, help the student **consider when or whether to self-disclose**, i.e. to tell others that they are on the autism spectrum.
13. If a student is experiencing challenges that are beyond the scope of a Peer Mentor’s role, guide him or her to **seek help through “dispute resolution.”** The Resident Assistants in dorms can help negotiate disputes with roommates, while counselors at your college may be trained to help mediate and resolve issues so that everyone’s needs are met. Check with the Office of Disability Services if you are not sure where to turn.

Body language can be important in communicating to “neurotypical” peers and teachers. While body language may not be an interesting or obvious form of communication to many people on the autism spectrum, self-advocates have suggested various ways to adapt. These suggestions are covered in self-advocacy training, and are included here so that Peer Mentors can be aware of the challenges body language may pose for some students with autism, and can offer support when needed:

1. When conversing, **make eye contact if possible; fix your eyes at a point near the person’s head or on their forehead if eye contact is uncomfortable.** Some people remind themselves to smile now and then to reassure the speaker that they are listening, while others find it easier to nod their head. Remember that the point of this body language is to **let your teacher or peer know that you care about what they are saying** and that you are paying attention.
2. **Be aware of where your body is and what message it might be sending** to others. For example, slouching in a chair may feel comfortable, but it may communicate boredom and disrespect to a teacher or communicate a wish to be left alone to a fellow student with whom you would like to spend time.
3. **Be aware of the space** between you and those with whom you are communicating. Getting too close can make people nervous; for typical conversations, try to keep about an arm’s length of distance between you.
4. If you feel your body may be sending the wrong messages due to self-regulatory needs (e.g. you are doing a lot of rocking or other movements in class, and would prefer not to) **consider scheduling classes with breaks between them**, and use the breaks for physical exercise, deep pressure, or other activities that are calming. Students with autism have noted that the option of scheduling a break between classes was one of the big advantages of college over high school.

B. Care of Personal Appearance

The way students attend to their **personal appearance affects not only their comfort and health, but is also a form of body language.** The student you are mentoring might be interested to know **clothing choices** are an appropriate topic of conversation when students are relaxing together. If appropriate, you might draw attention to what others are wearing, or offer some advice about what might look good on them. If needed, offer the student a “tutorial” on where and how to do laundry on campus. Here is some simple advice that any student might appreciate:

- ✓ Your everyday college **clothes should be comfortable and low maintenance.** Many students who live on campus don't bring anything that needs ironing; check the labels to identify easy-care items.
- ✓ Most college activities are informal. For classroom and studying, **think T-shirts, sweats, and cozy jeans or slacks (or casual skirts).** If you will be living in the dorm, bring comfortable things to sleep in that won't embarrass you in front of your room-mate or dorm-mates.
- ✓ **If you depend on the comfort of a favorite outfit, try to buy more than one of each item that you favor.** That way you can put one or two outfits in the laundry and still have a fresh one to wear. If possible, buy these favorite items in more than one color; that way others will not think you are wearing the same clothes every day!
- ✓ Be sure you **have at least one "professional-style" outfit** (with jacket and skirt or slacks for women; with button down shirt, tie, and suit jacket for men). You will need it if you participate in a work experience or practicum, and for the occasional campus activity that requires a more polished appearance.
- ✓ **Wear comfortable walking shoes.** A lot of campus life involves walking!
- ✓ **Bring weather appropriate clothes.** Many students keep a small foldable umbrella and rain poncho in the bottom of their backpack, as well as a plastic covering for their books. It's no fun to spend the day damp, or to find your important papers are too wet to read.
- ✓ **Don't go to class dressed in extreme fashions,** e.g. like a rock star or a fashion model might wear. You want your teachers and peers to take you seriously, not to see you as entertainment. If you enjoy wearing costume-type clothes, save them for evenings and weekends.

Good hygiene is especially important when you are learning, studying, and living close to others. Here is some more all-purpose advice:

- ✓ **Set up a regular schedule for showering, shampooing, and brushing your teeth, and stick to it.** Otherwise students tend to postpone their routines until they are too tired, and then fall asleep before carrying them out. If they have to jump up the next morning and rush off to class, they may go for days on end without a shower or even a change of clothes!
- ✓ **Try organizing self-care products all in one easy-to-see place, such as a totebox on your dresser.** Have soap, shampoo, deodorant, a toothbrush and toothpaste, a comb or brush, and your razor all together and in easy reach.

C. Study Skills

A big part of college success is taking charge of needed study time and balancing it in a healthy way with time for other outlets, such as social activities, recreation, and personal interests and hobbies. Students need to consider how to budget their time, how to deal with distractions (including people), and how to make appropriate use of their teacher's time and availability. Below are some frequently asked questions about time management, and some tips to think about. They apply to ALL students, not just those on the autism spectrum:

1. What common studying mistake should students avoid?

One of the **most common mistakes of new college students is to postpone studying** and working on assignments. They may feel very free because no one is checking their assignment book, monitoring them in a study hall, or checking up on them every day. They are not getting the usual prompts and reminders to study, so they don't study! They plan to catch up with the work later, closer to the test or exam. *This never works.* Such students usually find that the more the work piles up, the harder it becomes to get started. Eventually they may become panicked, and need to drop the course or ask the teacher for an "incomplete." Even if they do manage to catch up later, they probably will be disappointed in their grade.

2. How much time do I need to study?

A well-prepared student foresees these problems and **starts off right by creating a study schedule.** A student on the autism spectrum may wish to ask their Peer Mentor, their support staff, a counselor from the Office of Student Diversity, or their tutor for help in deciding how much time to spend on different subjects, and how to use that time best. New college students are often surprised at how little time they spend in the classroom. Compared to the 6 or 7 hours a day that they spent in high school classrooms, they might only be in college classes for 3 or 4 hours a day. However, the college day is not supposed to end after 3 or 4 hours! It is **usually recommended that students spend about 2 hours of study time daily for each hour spent in the classroom,** and that this study time should increase when a test or major assignment is almost due. That is only a general rule, and will depend on how difficult a subject is for you, how fast you read, and your skills of organizing and memorizing.

3. Where should I study?

Psychologists suggest that **studying in situations similar to a classroom will help you to recall what you learned.** The setting itself may act as a cue that helps remind you of what the teacher said. Students should also recall that trying to "cram" large amounts of information at one time – usually just before a test -- is not an effective strategy for most people. Studies show that the **amount of information a person can recall usually increases when study is spread over time.** Many students on the autism spectrum feel that they study well alone and prefer this option; however, group work and group study can be an important part of college life.

4. Do I need to study or work in a group?

Often college teachers will assign projects that need to be tackled interactively and in groups. **While many students on the spectrum do not prefer group projects, there are strategies they can use to make these assignments more comfortable:** volunteering for

a portion of the assignment that involves only one or two other workers; asking for a clear-cut outline of who is doing what for the assignment; leaving plenty of time before the due date; volunteering for an aspect of the project that draws on their strengths; and trying to choose partners who have demonstrated good attendance and active participation in class. If necessary, review these possibilities with the student you are mentoring. If all else fails, encourage and support the student to contact their professor and ask whether there is an alternative to the group assignment (i.e. working individually). Remind the student you are mentoring that it is **advantageous to study together at least some of the time**. He or she may want to share lecture notes to make sure nothing that happened in class is missed, or to get together with classmates and take turns quizzing each other before a big test.

5. Is it possible to self-advocate for study support?

Reassure the student you are mentoring that it's okay to ask for help in keeping to your study schedule! If the student expresses concerns that he or she is likely to put things off, **work with them by checking in regularly and prompting them** about maintaining their study schedule. **Study habits are like any other habit:** hard to build at first, but much easier as time goes by. Some students find that they can "incentivize" themselves to study by setting a goal of studying or writing for a reasonable length of time, and then planning to reward themselves with a favorite activity when the time is up. By making a game of it, they are able to complete tasks that they would otherwise avoid. If the student you are mentoring feels that time seems to slip away with too little accomplished, offer to help them be a detective: keep a record of a typical day in their life, and help them to note where they go, what they do, and for how long. One college graduate on the spectrum reflected that he "could have used counseling to give priority to homework, instead of staying at the student union building until it closed." The student may be surprised to discover unnecessary and time-wasting habits that have crept into his or her day and that would never be missed if they were dropped.

6. What classroom strategies will make studying easier?

Be on time to hear the introduction and priorities for each class session. You can miss very important information even if you are only a few minutes late. **Take notes** (or employ any record-keeping aid specified in your ADA or Section 504 plan), **keep records of the class together** in a binder or other organizer, and compare with other students' notes during study groups. **Review** this information soon after class to reinforce it in your memory. **Listen for the most important words or topics**, and pay attention to what the teacher emphasizes and repeats. If it is on the blackboard, whiteboard, overhead, or PowerPoint, it is probably important – so get it on record! **Stay to the very end of class** so that you hear the summary. **Check and review the priorities of the lecture before you read the assignments**, because this will help you focus and not waste time on unimportant details. **Know the rules of the class about asking questions** (for example, should you save your questions until the end of class? Or raise your hand instead of calling out?). Create some reminders of the questions you want to ask, but take turns with other students and don't monopolize the teacher. If your questions are too long to ask in class, make an appointment for an office visit. When visiting during office hours, ask how much time you may have and watch the clock. Remember that many or even most questions about a course can be answered by reading the materials, by asking other students in study groups, or by asking a tutor; **don't expect the teacher to act as your tutor!**

7. When and why should I meet with my teacher?

While your teacher will not expect to tutor you or be your study partner, he or she will be very willing to help you track and monitor your progress if you meet with them during office hours. For example, **some students ask the professor to review their assignments before they are turned in, to discuss why they received a low grade on an assignment, to discuss extra credit options, to ask for an extension on an assignment, or to suggest study strategies** to help them do better on exams. Most professors are more than happy to have these discussions with students who show genuine interest in the course subject matter, and a passion for learning. Students who learn how to “play the game” by meeting with professors early on can save themselves from problems and misunderstandings as the course progresses. Furthermore, **professors are more likely to be lenient with late assignments or extra credit allowances with students who have shown earnest efforts to meet with them** throughout the term.

D. Time Management

Most students struggle to manage their time wisely. College is so full of activities, and there is so much personal freedom, that it is easy to get distracted. If the student you are mentoring makes comments such as “Where did my day go? I haven’t even started on the things I wanted to accomplish!” then it is time to get that student help with time management.

1. Tools and methods for being on time

Fortunately, there are **many types of clocks and alarms** that can be programmed to alert or wake a student in time for class and other scheduled activities. **Visual Timers** are available in a variety of lights, displays, and sound effects. Alarms on clocks, blackberries, or computers can often be customized for maximum effect. Some people report that analog clocks work better than digital because they can visualize the units of time involved and respond to a perception of their “size.” Other students report that they have found ways to successfully outsmart themselves and prevent returning to bed; for example, they may set several alarm clocks in places far away from their bed. By the time they have gotten on their feet and walked around to turn them all off, they are fully awake. Help the student you are mentoring to experiment with various systems.

2. Reminders of deadlines, classes, obligations

Many students lose track of their class schedule, especially at the beginning of the semester, and miss important sessions. The student you are mentoring may benefit from **making multiple copies of his/her schedule and putting them in prominent places:** over the desk, taped inside a binder, even in a wallet. Many students also **program reminders into their computer, PDA, or Blackberry.** A low-tech **desk calendar, DayTimer, or weekly planner** will also work well. Self-advocates have suggested purchasing the best daily organizer and using it to record ALL obligations, including classes, study groups, appointments, clubs and activities, test dates, and deadlines for papers and projects.

As soon as a student becomes aware of a deadline, there should record it in their organizer of choice, and be sure to check upcoming dates frequently. When a large assignment is announced, they can **work backward in the calendar by planning how much time will be needed for writing, for researching, and for picking a topic and**

creating an outline. Students should give themselves a **due date for EACH STEP of the project**, not just for the entire project. This may seem difficult at first, so the Peer mentor may need to help create this step by step plan. Once the student gets used to doing it, it will seem easy and he or she will feel much less anxiety about completing work on time.

Remember that assignment **schedules should not be too tight**. For example, no student's schedule should depend on their ability to work on a project right up until the morning it is due. Unexpected events, such as getting sick or having a computer crash, can upset these plans. Urge the student you are mentoring to leave enough time so that, even if a problem arises, they will still have the flexibility to get the work done.

You might also work with the student to try methods that worked in the past: If color coding, pictures, or other organizational devices worked for that student in high school or elsewhere, why not use them now? Encourage the student to **look over the accommodations and supports he or she received through the IEP, and carry over any that worked well** into college.

D. Personal Safety

College can present **new challenges to personal safety and security**, especially if the student came from a small, protective high school environment where safety was seldom an issue. If he or she will be living on campus, there will be even more good safety habits to learn. Here are a few basic reminders that can keep any student – you, too! – secure. You may want to review it with the student you are mentoring:

- 1. Beware of computer theft.** For all students, a laptop is probably the most valuable thing you will be carrying. **Get a locking device**, such as a physical lock or electronic tracking or locking device. **Invest in a comfortable carrying case** that you will not be tempted to put down and forget. If possible, get a case in a bright color and customize it in ways that are likely to attract your attention and remind you not to leave it behind.
- 2. Watch your belongings in the library or wherever you are working.** Don't leave your laptop, iPod, or other belongings unattended if you must get to the rest room or the coffee machine. It is annoying, but either take them with you or ask someone you trust to guard them until you return.
- 3. Find the safest place to carry your wallet.** Make sure it cannot fall out of your pocket or be easily removed by a pickpocket. Be sure that you only **carry what you need**; for example, you probably only need one credit card. Carrying multiple cards gives a thief multiple chances to run up multiple bills.
- 4. Be sure that all emergency numbers are in your cell phone. Keep your cell phone in a carrying case that attaches inside your backpack or pocketbook.** In case your wallet is stolen, make sure you know what phone number to call to cancel your credit cards. Keep the number of campus security on your phone, just in case you need help.

5. Use the campus escort service at night, or go with a friend. Even if your campus is considered very safe and you are only walking to the library, after dark it is always best to travel with others.

6. Make sure someone knows where you are at all times. Whether you are living on campus or at home, be sure that someone knows where you're going and what time you expect to get back.

7. Driving to campus, alone or with a support person? **Lock the car.**

8. Living on campus? **Make sure the door to your residence hall is locked at all times, and don't let in anyone you don't know.** If someone is outside asking you to open the door because they lost their keys, or offering some other excuse, tell them you will go and get the person in charge (such as the dorm's Resident Assistant) to help them.

9. Make sure the door and windows of your room are locked at all times. Even if you have good, trustful feelings about your dorm-mates, you never know who is visiting. Dorm rooms are a favorite with many thieves because there are valuables within easy reach.

10. Be careful with your keys. Many students like to keep them hooked to a carrier around their neck or snapped to their belt loop. If you lose your keys, report this right away and pay the fine for a new set.

For Further Reading:

A helpful site for information about college life: collegelife.about.com

For more about time management and study skills:

http://studyskills.suite101.com/article.cfm/time_management_for_students#ixzz0KUy82hRx&C

The University of Minnesota Duluth has an extensive online handbook devoted to Study Strategies: <http://www.d.umn.edu/kmc/student/loon/acad/strat/>

The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University has a very useful online Study Skills Guide: <http://www.csbsju.edu/academicadvising/helplist.htm>

7. How can Peer Mentors support students with autism to enjoy a healthy, happy college lifestyle?

OBJECTIVE SEVEN: Enhance understanding of **quality of life issues** that are vital to college success, and how they may be experienced by students with autism: navigating friendships; maintaining mental and physical health; coping with peer pressure; and taking advantage of opportunities for personal growth

STUDENT PREPARATION: Read Section 7 of the Peer Mentor Guidebook before coming to class. Reflect on what you have learned in this mentoring course, and come prepared to identify the concepts you found most relevant and the questions or concerns that may remain.

The student you are mentoring may turn to you for support and advice about “quality of life” issues. Since college is often a time for great change and personal growth, it is not surprising that issues of friendship, peer pressure, and personal physical and mental wellbeing would loom large. Self-advocates have suggested some **simple rules that can help assure personal satisfaction and a high quality of life** for college students on the autism spectrum:

- **Take care of yourself!** Make mental and physical wellbeing a top priority, because no one can do well when they feel bad.
- **Know yourself** and set social goals that will make you happy.
- **Give yourself the chance to try new things** that look interesting, but “just say no” to activities that make you feel pressured or uncomfortable.

In this final part of your Peer Mentor training, we will consider some of the challenges that a student with autism might encounter in the **complex and less-structured college environment**, and how you might advise and support that student to enjoy a rewarding, well-rounded college experience.

Student Rule #1: Take care of yourself!

The college environment can be very exciting and stimulating for all students, but often more so for students with autism because their nervous systems can be highly reactive. In addition, the daily structures that were put in place for them during high school, such as lunch at a certain time and regularly scheduled exercise, are no longer required. Students can eat -- or not eat -- when and what they wish. Students also discover that they have a much greater choice about when to sleep or be active, or whether to exercise and be active at all. Unfortunately, some of the resulting experiments with these new “choices” can have a bad impact on a student’s health. If eating in the college cafeteria means they get more of their favorite healthy foods – great! But if it means a daily diet of ice cream for dinner -- not so great. Some students start switching their days and nights: they might schedule all their classes in the afternoon, and then stay up all night and try to go to sleep in the morning. **Disrupting the natural sleep cycle or replacing it with short naps at odd times, and skipping meals or replacing them with non-nutritious snack foods, are**

two common ways in which new college students can develop health problems. Soon they “don’t feel right,” become grouchy or tired, and wonder why. On top of this, the dense human environment of college life means that **there will be lots of germs that are easily transmitted. A run-down body with a depleted immune system is the perfect host.**

If the student you are mentoring is having problems getting healthy sleep and meals, here are some suggestions to consider: Advise them to **set up a sleep, meal, and exercise schedule that is comfortable, and stick with it!** If the main cafeteria is noisy or overwhelming, see whether there are other campus options they can access (like a smaller Food Court or campus cafe), or help them to identify a time of day when the cafeteria is least crowded. Suggest that they wear their headphones and sit in a far corner to create a more comfortable “microenvironment.” Emphasize the importance of not missing meals, or trying to replace them with non-nutritious snack foods from vending machines. If the student’s sleep is easily interrupted, **ask whether they have the option of a “quiet dorm” or a single room. Encourage the student to try to keep to a sleep schedule that allows for a long period of uninterrupted sleep.** Short naps, even if they add up to the same number of hours as “a good night’s sleep,” do not give equal benefit because the brain chemicals needed to restore optimal functioning cannot complete their job during naps. However, some self-advocates report that they are better able to cope with college stress when they enjoy both longer periods of rest AND occasional short naps.

If the student you are mentoring feels too bad to go to class or to keep an appointment with you, that is a message from their body that something is wrong. Help and encourage them to check in with the campus health services; they can treat the student if he or she is ill, or recommend counseling and other services if the root of the problem is stress or unhealthy habits.

Stress Management

Managing stress and maintaining good emotional health are vital to a satisfying college experience. Stress isn’t always a bad thing. **A little stress can help motivate and focus a student. But when everything feels like an emergency, the mind and body pay a heavy price.** Too much stress can lead to cognitive problems (such as difficulty thinking clearly or concentrating) and physical problems (such as gastrointestinal problems and overall tiredness) that disrupt students’ emotional lives, leaving them feeling moody and depressed. Many students with autism are predisposed to experience far higher levels of anxiety than the average person, making stress management a vital issue about which Peer Mentors should be vigilant. Here are some tips:

1. **Encourage the student to practice his or her self-advocacy skills!** Self-assertiveness is a stress reducer: we beat stress by taking charge of our lives!
2. **Support the student to maintain a regular schedule** that will minimize last-minute surprises.
3. **Encourage the student to find his or her ideal course load** and stick with it, even if it is a lighter load that will require a longer wait until graduation.
4. **Remind the student to schedule “down times”** throughout the day for relaxation.
5. **Help to locate a variety of peaceful places** on campus to which the student can retreat and decompress.

6. **Encourage the student to enroll in and practice soothing activities** that build body awareness, such as yoga.
7. **Suggest that the student learn deep-breathing techniques** for self-calming, and use them daily.
8. **Ask about and explore calming techniques that have worked for the student in the past**, such as brushing or wearing a weighted vest or lap pad.
9. **Encourage exercise!** This is an activity you can the student can easily do together. Many people find that regular vigorous exercise can result in stress release. Many college campuses have free access to recreational facilities, often including exercise equipment.
10. **Help the student surround him/herself with positive messages**, positive images, and positive self-talk.
11. **Identify and encourage regular communication with those people in the student's life who really make him or her feel good!**
12. **Help the student avoid social isolation.** Even if he or she can be reluctant to spend time with other students, remember that **time spent with others can be an antidote to depression**, can offer a "reality check" to negative thinking, and can stimulate a person's thoughts to move in new directions when they are feeling "stuck."
13. **Identify what makes the student laugh.** Whatever it is, help him or her get more of it.
14. **Identify music that is soothing to the student**, and help make it a part of his or her daily routine.
15. **Help the student to identify and try to avoid people, situations, and topics that stress him or her out.** Some people become agitated if they listen to the evening news, shop in a crowded store, or get involved in a discussion of politics – so why not avoid those triggers?
16. **Guide and support the student to avoid perfectionism**, which is a major source of unnecessary stress. Help him or her to look at the big picture by asking, "How important will this seem next month or next year?" As appropriate, use the magic words "That's good enough!"
17. **Remind the student that we all learn by experimenting and making mistakes.** Use – and help the student use -- those other magic words, "No big deal!"

If feelings of anxiety and depression start to take over a student's life, most college campuses offer **mental health services and counseling**. Many students take advantage of these services, and **no one should ever feel shy or embarrassed** about doing so. If the student you are mentoring needs extra support, reassure them that it takes an intelligent, decisive person to identify a problem and seek a solution.

Student Rule #2: Know yourself

In addition to academic success, most people would agree that experiencing social success is a big part of the college experience. However, **definitions of what social success should look like differ greatly from person to person**. They differ not only according to whether people are on the autism spectrum, but according to:

- Personality
- Family and background

- Culture
- Age and maturity
- Interests and favorite activities
- Sensory “comfort zone”
- ...and many other factors

Social success comes in many different shapes and sizes:

- Some college students hope to **make one or two close friends** to hang out with.
- Some would like to **become student leaders who are widely known** on campus.
- Some dream of **dating and finding romance**.
- Some define social success as **being respected and taken seriously** by their teachers and peers.

Many students with autism have found that college is **an easier place to get along with peers** than high school was. This may be because many college students are more serious and more mature. As one self-advocate put it, “College was the first time people accepted me as I was. It was a Godsend for me.” With most campuses featuring a wide variety of courses, clubs, and activities, **it is also more likely that a college student who has special interests will find others who share them**. Some self-advocates report that acceptance alone was all they wanted during their college years. They were satisfied to be admired for their academic success and chose not to seek out nonacademic opportunities for social interaction. Other self-advocates made different decisions and cultivated different degrees of social involvement.

Nurturing friendships and romance: Some students with autism report that they would like to have close friends or “best friends,” but find these very personal social relationships to be a challenge. One student who gave input for this training felt that he needed to be more patient about letting relationships develop slowly, and wondered whether he appeared too intense or intrusive in repeatedly seeking out people he wished to befriend. Another self-advocate offered very precise advice: “Don’t keep knocking in student doors over and over if they don’t answer, you can scare them.” Self-advocates repeatedly emphasized that it was a good idea to **approach people they liked “indirectly” by relating to them through mutual interests**. For example, the student’s brain may be saying “I want to be your best friend!” but it is less overwhelming if that student actually says something like, “Can I join your study group before the science test?” As a Peer Mentor, you may wish to advise a student to **keep it simple, start out slow, and focus on the things that they and their new acquaintance both enjoy**.

Social networking online is another way that students meet and friendships can form. Some students like to use FaceBook, MySpace, and other online networks to tell others about themselves and connect with likeminded peers. This can be a pleasant and low pressure way to meet other students. However, if the student you are mentoring finds that his or her only friends are online friends there won’t be anyone to hang out or go to class with. Open a discussion if social networking seems to be taking up too much of the student’s life. Encourage the student to try thinking of social networking as a way to start friendships and practice interactions, but to limit his or her time online if it is getting in the way of real-world interactions.

Searching for romantic relationships is an important part of college life for many students. Fortunately, the complicated “dating scene” that once existed on college campuses is much more relaxed now. **Students can get to know each other informally, often by getting together in groups, and can enjoy typical, low pressure, inexpensive activities** such as having lunch together in the cafeteria or attending a free movie in the student center. **The same considerations that apply to making friends apply to finding romance: take it slowly and give the relationship time to form and grow.** As one self-advocate puts it, “Respect boundaries.” If the student you are mentoring finds that he or she is often seeking a person out, but that person seldom seem to return the interest, you might encourage them to turn down the intensity. Reassure the student that there is no need to panic: **most people will seek out and spend time with many potential partners before finding “the right one.”** Encourage the student to **relax and “be yourself,”** because people who are self-confident, are enjoying learning new things, and have high expectations for the future are naturally attractive to others.

Student Rule #3: Give yourself the chance to try new things

College can be a wonderful time to experiment and try new things, academically and in other areas. Most colleges have “general education requirements” to encourage students to explore new subjects and ideas. Sometimes students with autism enter college with very well-defined ideas of what they want to study, and view these requirements with discomfort or annoyance. If that is the case with the student you are mentoring, encourage him or her to **pick a few “gen ed” courses in areas that are new to them and approach them with an open mind.** They might be pleasantly surprised! Many students on the autism spectrum have reported that taking college courses in psychology and sociology helped them to understand themselves and other people better. Knowing what research has discovered about “why people act the way they do” has helped many people with autism to gain insight into the lives of their peers and into the roots of puzzling social customs. Students on the spectrum have also reported enjoying courses in such diverse subjects as film studies, foreign languages, and political science, even when they originally had little interest in these areas.

College also offers all students opportunities to join new clubs and activities, meet people from different backgrounds and cultures, visit new places, experiment with new styles and clothing, expand cultural awareness and tastes (e.g. in music, movies, performing arts), and try new foods. Some students on the autism spectrum report that college seems more diverse than high school, and perhaps for that reason they find it easier to fit in. Several college graduates on the spectrum have cited the presence of students from different countries and cultures as one of the most positive aspects of their college experience, feeling that they were especially well-accepted by these students and were able to reach out and help them (e.g. proofreading their assignments) in ways that were appreciated.

Some students with autism, however, report that they are being exposed to too many new things at once. If that is a problem for the student you are mentoring, work with him or her to **try staying within their comfort zone for most things (e.g. wear their favorite clothes and listen to their favorite music) while trying just one new thing each week or two (e.g. attend a college basketball game, even though they’ve never paid attention to basketball before; try a new cuisine at the Food Court).** Encourage them to share

these experiences with their friends or fellow “social networkers” online; they might be surprised to find them enjoyable, but even if they don’t the knowledge gained will be valuable.

Helping Students Make Good Choices: When to “Just say no”

In college students may also encounter people who encourage them to try bigger and more personal changes than just a new rock group or a new hairstyle. **Campuses can be home to political and religious organizations, social movements, and advocacy groups that try to recruit new volunteers or members. Some of these groups or movements may do good, responsible work, while others may be of questionable ethics or value. Some of the ones that do good work may provide a student with a valuable new experience, while others may not be a good fit for that student’s strengths and needs.**

How can anyone tell the difference? Unfortunately, this is one of those areas of adult life where there are no easy answers. Self-advocates have expressed concern over the possibility that others may try to take advantage of them, and over their difficulty in determining the sincerity and intentions of others. If the student you are mentoring encounters an individual or group that encourages them to make a major change in their plans or lifestyle, try helping them to reflect on and answer these questions:

1. **Do I understand clearly** what I am being asked to commit to, and why?
2. **Does it make sense** to me? **Are my questions welcomed** and answered fully? **Or do I feel pressured to agree** and afraid to say no?
3. **Does it make me feel good, or do I feel very anxious or panicked?**
4. If a person or group is urging me to make an important commitment or change in my life, **are they encouraging me to talk it over first with family, friends, and trusted advisors?** Or are they discouraging me from communicating with or trusting my family, friends, and advisors?
5. **What do I want to be doing in my life** in 1 year? In 5 years? **Will this commitment or change help me get there,** or make it harder for me to get there?

Whether a student is being asked to join the Peace Corps or a picket line, a new religion or a political campaign, it has to make sense for his or her life and plans. If the student is being asked to consider a significant change in plans or lifestyle, or join an activity that he or she is unsure of, they should be strongly encouraged to **take their time and communicate with those people in their life whom they have always trusted. One of the most important roles of friends is to help give a “reality check” on whether an endeavor or idea sounds safe and fun, or “fishy.”** With the new responsibilities of college comes the possibility of being exposed to scams or people who do not have the best intentions. **People with autism might be particularly vulnerable to being coerced or conned. Slowing decision making or running ideas by a friend or acquaintance might be a good strategy for someone who is concerned about making harmful choices. College is full of new choices, but no one should ever feel pressured into making any of them.**

For Further Reading:

To continue learning from the works of self-advocates on the autism spectrum, students are encouraged to try the books of Temple Grandin, Tito Mukhopadhyay, Stephen Shore, William Stillman, and Donna Williams. These are only a few of the valuable and insightful works now readily available.