

# Going Through College with Asperger's

Maureen Johnson, Ph.D., is a Health Education Instructor at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She's also an adult with an autism spectrum diagnosis.

Having recently gone through the college system, Maureen has first person knowledge of how to smooth the path to graduation. Her suggestions are a great start for teens with autism (and their parents) as they think about applying for, managing, and thriving in college.

- Obtain certification of your ASD from your medical professional. In order to obtain accommodations on a college campus (such as disability support services), you will probably be required to have documentation of your ASD from a physician, neurologist, or psychiatrist.
- When applying for college or a program, it is a good idea to indicate your disability. Of course, you are not required to do so. However, state institutions are not permitted to discriminate against someone due to a disability.
- Without delay, locate the disability support services on campus. This is very important, as they will likely be the professionals who will arrange (or provide verification) for you to receive necessary accommodations to perform well in your courses.
- Let your professors know of your ASD and what may be helpful to you. If possible, arrange a meeting with your professors before the beginning of the semester, but no later than the first week. They will probably respect your honesty and the initiative you are taking in your courses. Also, don't hesitate to ask for help. As an instructor, I am always willing to help someone who asks for it.
- If you are planning on living in a dorm, you may want to let the administration know about your ASD or request a private room. If you are someone who is extremely sensitive to external stimuli (light, sound, etc), you may want to be placed in a "study floor" instead of a "sorority wing." Or, if possible, you may want to request a private room so that you have a little more control over your environment.
- Do your best! Speaking as an instructor who also has an ASD, I am sensitive to students who have special needs. However, this also means I expect students to attend class unless they have medical documentation.
- Seek career counseling as soon as possible. Finding a job after graduation is particularly challenging for students with an ASD. Unfortunately, society tends to focus on the limitations that come with the word "autism" rather than the strengths. So you may want to write down some activities you really enjoy doing or perform particularly well. This can be very helpful for a career counselor who will work to provide you with some direction in terms of courses, volunteer, and internship opportunities.
- Have the number of a personal counselor nearby. You may have your good days and bad. Some issues can be especially daunting for a college student with an ASD. There's no shame in speaking with a counselor on campus who can help you work through those issues.
- Utilize your advisor. Take an active approach with your advisor. It can't hurt to mention your ASD so you can work with your advisor to find a career that is compatible with your

strengths. Share the results of any career testing with your advisor, so that you may receive more guidance.

- Write down your strengths as well as your limitations. As I mentioned, society tends to focus on the limitations of an ASD rather than the strengths. You need to advocate for yourself by writing down what you do well and those tasks in which you have succeeded.
- Establish a medical care provider near your campus. This is extremely important because as a person with an ASD, you have special medical conditions that many college students will not share. Do some research online or ask your hometown physician for a referral.
- Join an activity to meet people with similar interests to your own. Socializing is not something that always comes easily to people with an ASD. Think of those activities you enjoy or in which you have succeeded. There are bound to be groups or clubs focusing on that activity.
- Consider taking a few classes online. Students with an ASD may be overwhelmed by the harsh lighting and noise from a classroom. You may want to check and see if a couple of your required classes may be taken online. However, be advised that taking classes online actually requires more self-discipline than in a traditional classroom.

Maureen also makes a point of saying: “Congratulate yourself for having the ambition to attend college and not letting yourself be limited by a limitation! If you’ve made it this far, there’s no telling what else you will do!”