

College Options for Adults with Autism/Asperger's: Arizona and National

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Overview: This article is intended to help adults with Autism/Asperger's of varying levels of academic ability learn about the many options that they have for education after high school. There is no one "right" option for everyone; rather, there are many different options available, both in Arizona and nationally.

Background: For many individuals with developmental disabilities, their education stops in high school with special education classes. However, there are actually several opportunities for them to continue their education.

Also, even for those adults able to take college courses, they may need extra support to succeed in college, and may especially need special courses to improve their social and life skills. Earning a college degree does not guarantee employment and independence, as one national survey of adults with high-functioning autism/Asperger's found that half had college degrees, but still 90% were unemployed and unable to live independently.

So, in addition to taking college courses, it is critical to focus on social skills needed to be successfully employed, and life skills to help develop friendships and live independently.

Options: Below we list many different options available in Arizona and nationally, including college, community college, and special programs. Some programs are more geared towards academics, and some are more geared towards social, vocational, and life skills.

College: Colleges and community colleges have Disability Resource Centers that can provide limited services to students with developmental disabilities. Because they serve all students, they sometimes have limited understanding of the special needs of students with autism/Asperger's, and limited supports for them. Typical services for students with autism/Asperger's may include counseling, note-taking assistance, and extra time for exams. Also, each course instructor will have weekly office hours when students can come for help, and general tutoring services are available for many courses.

Funding: In addition to standard college financial aid, students can request that college tuition be covered by the federal Vocational Rehabilitation program if their courses will contribute to a plan for them to become "competitively employed" (i.e., paid employment). For more information, contact the Rehabilitation Services Administration, <https://www.azdes.gov/rsa/VR/>

Arizona Programs

Arizona State University: ASU has started a 1-credit class for students with Asperger's, SPE 394: Autism Spectrum Disorders Higher Ed, offered on the Tempe and Polytechnic (East) campuses. The course description states it is "A hybrid course specifically designed to benefit students diagnosed with ASD which covers general issues and practical applications of coping strategies, study skills, and independent living skills within a higher education setting." The course focuses on reading *Aquamarine Blue*, a collection of stories about the experiences and challenges of students with Asperger's living in college. This is a great way for the students to discuss college challenges, speak about their own personal issues in a supportive environment, and most importantly hopefully develop friendships with other students. The students also formed an "Aspies at ASU" club. For more info, contact garret.westlake@asu.edu

University of Arizona - Project Focus: Project Focus was started in fall 2011 as a special program for students with intellectual disabilities. It is a two-year program, in which students take 6 credits in fall and spring semesters, including 3 credits of "community volunteer internship" at a local company, and a 3-credit course of their choice with a modified curriculum. The program provides substantial 1-on-1 mentoring, and students are generally on campus from 9 am to 3 pm. The program is funded by a 5-year federal grant, and tuition costs are mostly covered by Vocational Rehabilitation funding. Students receive a certificate upon completing the 2-year program. For more info contact <http://projectfocus.arizona.edu/>

Community Colleges: Community college classes are often smaller than at universities, and tuition costs are much lower. In addition to regular academic courses, most offer "personal development" classes that can be very helpful for students with autism/Asperger's, such as introduction to college, study skills, friendship, self-esteem, career exploration, etc. Students with intellectual challenges may enjoy taking classes in art, music, exercise/fitness, and other topics, and some classes may allow curriculum modification for students with special needs. So, some students may want to attend a community college as a stepping stone to a 4-year college, some may want to earn a 2-year associates degree, and some may want to just sample a variety of courses of personal or vocational interest. Contact the disability resource center at the community college for more information.

Spectrum Transition Program: This is a private residential program in Scottsdale for young adults with Asperger's. Their goal is "Providing a supportive, residential and day, post-secondary program for young men and women with Executive Function Deficits, Asperger's Syndrome and High Functioning Autism, who need assistance academically, socially, and emotionally." Students take classes at Scottsdale Community College or other nearby colleges. The cost is approximately \$60,000/year. For more info, see www.spectrumcollegetransition.org

Chapel Haven West: This is a private 2 year residential program in Tucson for young adults with high-functioning autism/Asperger's, with intense support of social, residential, and vocational skills, and minor academic support. Students live in a private apartment complex near the U of A campus. Students take a 1-credit course at the University of Arizona each semester, so they are also U of A students with access to U of A facilities. After the two year program, most students are able to work in

the community and live independently with support (Chapel Haven offers ongoing supports to alumni, typically several hours/week, as needed). Chapel Haven has a 30-year history in Connecticut, and the Tucson branch started in about 2007. The cost is approximately \$60,000/year. For more info see www.chapelhaven.org/west

Life Development Institute: LDI in Glendale offers high school, college, and career-focused programs for adults with Learning Disabilities, ADHD, Asperger's, Autism, and similar conditions. The college program involves a two year residential program with students living in an integrated apartment complex. All students participate in life skills and recreational programs. Some students take college classes (mostly Paradise Valley Community College and Glendale Community College) and some focus instead on vocational skills and employment. The cost is approximately \$70,000/yr. See <http://lifedevelopmentinstitute.org/>

Camp Civitan: Camp Civitan offers a program in which students with developmental disabilities begin with taking day classes in Phoenix for 1-2 semesters, and then transition to a residential program in Williams (northern Arizona), where they may take a college class from nearby Coconino Community College. This program began in 2011. The program is available to students 18-21 years who have not yet graduated from high school, and are thus eligible for ESA grants from the Arizona Dept of Education (i.e., the program is free if you receive an ESA grant). For more info contact: www.campcivitan.org

Bridgeway: Bridgeway is a comprehensive support program for students with special needs who are interested in pursuing a college education. Bridgeway provides academic support in the form of 4 hours of one-on-one tutoring each week, assistance with choosing and registering for classes and guidance for students as they work with college disability resource offices. Additionally, Bridgeway sponsors frequent social activities that encourage communication and friendship building. The program was started in 2011 and currently has 20 students. During the 2011-2012 school year, Bridgeway students earned 220 combined credits with an overall GPA of 3.14. The cost is \$5,000 per school year or \$2,500 per semester. For more info, see the website at www.bridgewayaz.org or contact the director at crawford@bridgewayaz.org

Success through Education, Exploration, and Development (SEEDs): SEEDs is a vocational program in Phoenix which teaches young adults with autism/Asperger's important social and work skills through a variety of functional and marketable art projects, taught by local artists and educators. See www.seedsforautism.org

National Programs

Marshall University: In the authors opinion, this is one of the best college programs for students with Asperger's who are capable of college-level coursework, and serves as a model of the type of program that is most helpful to them. Marshall is a private university located in West Virginia. Students must meet the regular admission criteria for attending Marshall, and then apply for the College Students with Asperger's program. Students attend regular college courses, live in dorms with regular students, and receive 15 hours/week of 1-on-1 support for academic and social issues. This generally involves meeting

with a counselor at the beginning of the day to plan their schedule, and then a meeting at the end of the day to review how the day went. They have an amazing 93% college graduation rate. The program started in 2002, and they currently have 40 students. The cost is about \$3700/semester for the support program, plus regular tuition, room, and board at Marshall. Most students in the program have the program fee, and sometimes even tuition, covered by their state's vocational rehabilitation program. <http://www.marshall.edu/atc/content/college-program.php>

College Internship Program: The College Internship Program is a comprehensive post-secondary transition program for young adults (ages 18-26) on the autism spectrum and with learning differences. It provides individualized social, academic, career and life skills instruction. The cost is about \$70,000/year. Shorter summer programs are available. For more info see www.cipworldwide.org/

Resources

Transition to Work: Tips for Individuals with Autism/Asperger's and their Parents, Teachers, and Employers - a 6-page handout available for free at <http://autism.asu.edu>

Think College! College Options for People with Intellectual Disabilities.
<http://www.thinkcollege.net/index.php>