

How to Find Autism-Friendly Colleges

When researching colleges, autistic students and their families should consider what services will promote success.

By [Joanna Nesbit](#) USNews and World Report Oct. 11, 2024

Key Takeaways:

- The number of college students with autism is increasing.
- Some colleges have more support services and programs than others.
- **Autistic students and their parents should ask prospective colleges some key questions.**

Deciding where to attend [college](#) is challenging for any student, but autistic students may find the choice even harder. Moving to college means making new friends, living with a roommate and managing new academic routines without the family support available in high school.

About 1 in 36 children in the U.S. was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder in 2020, according to the most recent federal data. That's up from 1 in 150 in 2000 and 1 in 68 in 2010. **More autistic students are going to college than ever before.** Colleges are responding by designing campus support programs. "In 2000, there were two specialized autism support programs, and now in 2024, there are close to 100," says Jane Thierfeld Brown, director of College Autism Spectrum, an independent organization with resources for autistic students, families, schools and professionals. "Colleges are really listening and looking at enhanced services and programs."

The Shift from High School

Federal law mandates colleges give equal access to higher education by providing reasonable accommodations, such as extended test time or testing in a quiet location. Some campuses are more autism-friendly than others, going beyond federal mandates with social support, academic and career coaching and other programming.

Parents may like the idea of these supports, but **students are in the driver's seat at the college level. They get to decide if they want to disclose their autism diagnosis to the disabilities office. Once they do, they still need to go through established campus procedures to receive accommodations from professors. It's a big change from high school and requires the ability to self-advocate,** experts say. And because of the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, commonly called [FERPA](#), **colleges cannot legally provide mental health information to parents without the student's prior consent.**

Holistic Considerations

Autistic students' needs vary widely, and finding the right college involves multiple considerations, experts say. "**We tell families not to pick a school based on the support only,**" says Amy Rutherford-Moody, director of the Mosaic, a support program for autistic students at the [University of Tennessee at Chattanooga](#). "It's so important to feel like you're a part of a community, regardless of what that community is."

UTC junior Ella Dunkelberger looked at several colleges in Tennessee, her home state, before opting for UTC and Mosaic's comprehensive resources, including study support, coaching and career exploration. "Without the program, I don't think I'd be as successful as I am," she says. "At the beginning when I was really overwhelmed, it helped me establish a [schedule](#) and a routine." Dunkelberger met weekly with an academic coach to go over assignments and, with the program's encouragement, pushed herself socially to try new things. "That's sometimes very hard for autistic individuals because we like our set schedules and set routines," she says.

Tips for Your Search

As you and your family begin the college search, keep these tips in mind to help you narrow your choices.

Let the Student Lead

After years of taking charge for their student, parents may hesitate to let a student lead, but **it's necessary for a student in college search conversations, experts say**. "Students have to information-gather and problem-solve all the way through their college experience," Rutherford-Moody says. **Letting them lead at the front end – with families partnering – helps them learn the skills to handle college.**

Consider a Variety of Attributes

Besides services for autism, students should think about **what else is important to them**. Considerations may include [major](#), school size, distance from home, whether [religion](#) is important, ethnic and cultural groups and other factors, experts say. Even the weather may be a consideration if you don't like wearing a heavy coat, says Lorre Wolf, founding consultant with College Autism Spectrum and former director of disability and access services at [Boston University](#) in Massachusetts.

Ask Plenty of Questions

As your family explores campuses, seek answers to the following questions, particularly for schools without autism support programs. Those answers will guide your college search.

- Has the college staff worked with many autistic students, and do they have training in the area?
- What kind of special programming is available, if any?
- How strong is the disability services relationship with other campus offices, including residence life, academic advising, [student employment](#) and student mental health? How closely do the offices work together?
- Are single rooms a possibility?
- How many credits are required per term? Can a student attend less than full time and still live in a [residence hall](#)?
- What is the availability of mental health therapists or crisis counselors?
- What is the caseload of disability services?
- How often do students usually meet with a disability services professional?

"We encourage families to call and interview the disabilities office," Wolf says. (Some families opt for non-disclosure, thinking it might help with admission, but only students who disclose get services, and it's not worth getting into a school that would be

Understand Associated Costs

Many specialized services cost extra, sometimes thousands of dollars per semester. **Some offer hands-on academic and social support while others offer narrower support for no cost.** Many are somewhere between, and financial aid or scholarships may be available. [Nova Southeastern University](#) in Florida provides Access Plus, a comprehensive program with a daily two-hour study hall, assignment supervision, extracurricular support and weekly psychoeducational groups for \$9,644 per semester, on top of the university tuition. The Neurodiversity Navigators program at [Bellevue College](#) in Washington offers individualized advocacy, educational opportunities and access services for no cost.

Visit the Campus

Touring a campus is the best way to determine how accessible it feels, experts say. A small college may feel more personal and manageable, but larger colleges offer more majors. If possible, go in person to get a feel for size, classes, culture and resources.

Explore ASD Program Specifics

You may be able to manage the college transition with a just few test accommodations. Or you may decide you want extra support to help you make friends more easily, develop community and learn to juggle multiple priorities.

Students sometimes use private coaching when their campus doesn't provide ASD services, which can include time-management coaching, breaking down assignments, [stress management](#), self-advocacy skills and even role-playing scripts for different situations. Rutherford-Moody, who offers private coaching, says more ASD coaching services are popping up all the time. "Look for a coach who has worked in a higher education setting or has lived experience in navigating the process," she advises.

Evaluate the Need to Ease Into College Academics

Some students need time to adjust to college-level academics and the new social setting by initially taking a lighter academic load. Find out what's allowable to be able to live on campus. You may want to start at a community college.

And don't assume you can't handle college, experts say. "Autistic students are capable of going to college," Dunkelberger says. "Look for a program that's supportive of you in what you want to accomplish."

Cultivate Independence Starting in High School

For success at college, developing independence skills is essential, experts say, and the earlier, the better. That includes basics like waking up to an alarm by yourself, balancing school work with [extracurriculars](#) without a parent's help, doing your own laundry, going to the grocery store on your own, making your own appointments and even getting a part-time job while in high school. "The skills you develop in the workplace and at home transfer to college," says Brown, co-author of "The Parent's Guide to College for Students on the Autism Spectrum" and the forthcoming book, "Neurodiversity and College: A Guide for Parents of Autistic Students."

Dunkelberger [missed her family](#) tremendously when she started college. "My first semester was challenging because my family is my rock," she says. "I'll be honest, there were days I didn't want to leave my dorm room." But the psychology major is thriving, and in the fall 2024 semester she's mentoring autistic freshmen the same way she received mentoring her first year.