

## PREPARING TO BE NERDY WHERE NERDY CAN BE COOL: COLLEGE PLANNING FOR THE HIGH FUNCTIONING STUDENT WITH AUTISM

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### Introduction

For many high functioning individuals on the autistic spectrum, college can be about as close as you can get to Heaven on Earth (and, let's face it, for the time being, the latter is where most of us are stuck!) But it is also a place that many raise some challenges that we should plan for. In this article, I have attempted to offer some ideas based on both my experiences as a student and as a college professor. I must emphasize, however, that as with any other autism related issue, college choices must be based on the unique circumstances and characteristics of the individual, and no simple formulas can be offered.

[Survey of Colleges With Experience Serving Students on the Autistic Spectrum](#)

[Interview with Dr. Vernon Smith--2002 Nobel Laureate in economics--on Asperger's Syndrome](#)

We should recognize that in many cases, the experiences that high functioning individuals with autism (HFIWAs) will face in college are not entirely different from those of our more "neurotypical" peers. Many students must adjust to living away from home for the first time, to the responsibility for time management that comes along with a less structured schedule, to the changed social roles and expectations, and to the greater academic challenges that college will "dish" out. Nevertheless, we must be careful not to dismiss too easily many of these potential problems merely because they affect others, too. The HFIWA will frequently need—or can at the very least benefit from—some more "tailor made" coping strategies.

Many of us have learned that a sense of humor has been essential in coping with life. I hope not to disappoint you here!

### Areas of Concern

The HFIWA faces several potential areas of problems with higher education:

- Gaining admission to a desired college; Moving away from home, if needed, and handling emerging social situations;
- Handling pragmatics such as time management, budgeting, and transportation;
- Completing the required course work;
- Securing needed services; and
- Planning for and actually transitioning to life after college.

We will consider each, though not strictly in the chronological sequence presented above. Since other sources—such as Liane Holliday Willey (1999), Stephen Shore (2000), and Jerry Newport (2001)—provide advice for navigating the college scene once there, I will focus more on preparations that should preferably begin years before the start of college. Issues of particular emphasis will be handling high school course work in a manner that will best facilitate college admission and success, preparing for standardized tests, and selecting the most appropriate college. Alternatives to traditional universities, such as community colleges and trade schools, are considered with their pros and cons. The theme of maintaining one's motivation and as much enthusiasm as possible throughout the process recurs through the paper.



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## ABSTRACT

College is a tremendous opportunity for many individuals on the autistic spectrum. Little has been written on *preparing* for college, as opposed to surviving once there. This preparation should ideally have an early start. Based on the speaker's own experiences both as a college professor and an individual on the autistic spectrum, strategies for selecting colleges, handling high school course work, and taking standardized exams are discussed. Using strengths to compensate for areas of difficulty is emphasized.

### My Own Experience

First a bit about my own case. It wasn't until many years after I graduated from college that I was actually diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, and no one—myself included—had been particularly worried about what college would have in store for me. It was true that my quantitative skills did not seem to match my verbal ones, but even for college bound students, I was probably at or above average. In any event, as a pre-law student, I was going to major in political science anyway. (Fortunately, it took me only one quarter to realize that being an attorney was not for me, and I then set out with the more palatable objective of becoming a professor). Luck also had it that I did not have to move away. Cal Poly State University—which seemed to me and to my family as the best there ever was—necessitated only sixteen miles of driving in relatively light traffic. Going away somewhere else just did not seem to make either economic or academic sense anyway.

It is true that we worry about many HFIWAs' abilities to handle such pragmatics as taking notes in class—even when we are talking about some of the more intellectually able ones (see Attwood, 1998; Myles and Andreon, 2001; and Stanton, 2000 for a discussion of this issue). As it happens, I never cared much for handwritten notes. They were messy (particularly when created in my handwriting), imperfect, and incomplete. I just took those notes as a matter of convention, frequently to barely glance at them again. I relied instead on the textbook for actual studying. The problems I had with time management and a possible overly literal interpretation of test questions were probably not much different from those of most ordinary students.

As an eccentric of sorts, I by and large enjoyed studying and was enthralled with the diversity of subjects to be considered. When I did have to take a survey biology course that dealt with such nonsense as the meiosis cycle, I knew that getting that “garbage” was part of the rules for completing my college education, and I accepted the drudgery of this course (which I took on a “credit/no credit” basis). Again, not an experience different from those of most other students. I would eventually face the sheer terror and frustration of matrix algebra—something no sane person would do by hand outside the classroom anyway—but that was the exception rather than the rule.



In my own case, what was most dreadful was probably what the great majority of students look most forward to. It was bad enough that there were breaks between sessions: I can sympathize with Madonna, who asked about the stay at her childhood playground, “Why did it have to end?” But it really turned out not to be so bad. What saved me from certain misery was that I could go straight into an M.B.A. program. None of that “nonsense” of getting practical experience before going on! And, although the road was frequently tumultuous, I eventually managed quite a “pull-off.” When I got my doctorate, I merely had to switch sides in the classroom! So, please beware that this is written from the point of view—and with the occasional unapologetic bias—of someone who found college more of a “refuge” than anything else. (By the way, when some people talk about the “real world”—what's so real about it anyway? [Watch out what happens when you let someone with autism loose on philosophy!])

### Gaining Admission to a Desired College

College admissions officials and committees face the unenviable task of having to select which students to admit based on a limited number of criteria varying in objectivity. For the most part, however, colleges tend to base their decisions on some combination of high school grades, test scores, and sometimes a student's extra-curricular activities. Occasionally, schools will tend to consider more individual factors, but as a side-effect of the decision by many states to limit affirmative action as a consideration in college admissions, affected colleges are facing tighter mandates to base their decisions on relatively more “objective” measures. Unfortunately, what could be more “objective” than clear, numerical grades and test scores?

*Standardized tests.* Let's consider test scores first. For some individuals, of course, these criteria can be quite favorable. Some HFIWAs have high test and IQ scores. Thus, many actually gain admission into quite selective institutions, often with impressive scholarships, and actually *staying* in those colleges turns out to be the real challenge. For many of us, however, performance is somewhat uneven, so we may excel in one area—either the quantitative *or* the verbal, for example, but not both. Some of us take standardized tests well and some of us do not. In my own case, I was able to get admission into my college of choice despite rather mediocre SAT scores, but then I had relatively consistent good grades (save for a one semester “C” in Algebra III!). The bad news for those who follow me today is that by now, “grade inflation” has caused marks to lose credibility as an alternative measure of potential.

Most universities today weigh one of three standardized tests heavily in their admissions process. The SAT—an acronym that used to stand for “Scholastic Aptitude Test” a title that has now been removed, leaving the test to be surrounded by an aura of mystique—is a multiple-choice exam that is supposed to measure “aptitude”—or a student's “promise” with respect to performing well in general college course work. The American College Testing Assessment (ACT) and the SAT II—a variant on the original SAT both consist of multiple choice questions that purport to measure “achievement”—i.e., what one has actually learned in classes. The reality is that these tests do have some predictive power as to how students will perform in school, but they are imperfect (and in my view, highly overrated) measures of ability learning.




At this time, I will spare you all but a relatively brief (by my standards, anyway!) diatribe on the intellectual bankruptcy of standardized tests. By their very nature, multiple choice exams are intended to measure success based on the pathetic criterion of whether one can arrive at one preferred “correct” answer. This rewards those inclined toward unimaginative *convergent* thinking—that is, seeing things as they are seen by most people. Ugh! Those of us gifted with the much more important skill of *divergent* thinking—seeing things in imaginative and unique ways—are deprived of our rightful reward. Ugh!

There is some question as to whether one can improve one’s score on aptitude tests by studying since the tests are supposed to measure some kind of “innate” ability rather than knowledge. It is, however, my opinion that the Candy Man is *not* the only one who can!

First of all, everyone will agree that at the very least, one should be prepared for the *type* of questions that will be asked. Going through one or more sample tests will make one more familiar with the type of exam questions, and it is crucial to get this practice to learn how to manage time in tackling a sequence of questions.

The real controversy is whether one can significantly improve a score by studying beyond these basics, or by taking the exam over. A number of commercial firms, which will go unnamed, offer preparatory courses that often cost thousands of dollars, and a recent study has suggested that the average gains made by students taking one of the more expensive ones appear to be at best limited. The Educational Testing Service (ETS), which administers the SAT, also has a strong interest in not having people retake the exam since this may undermine important statistical properties of the test.

My own experience with the Graduate Management Aptitude Test (GMAT), the business graduate school equivalent, has, however, led me to believe that one *can* boost a score by thorough preparation. I never attended any of the expensive seminars, but I did buy a very useful book by Gary Gruber, who taught *strategy* rather than rote test taking. (Some items on one section could, for example, be answered based on the *grammatical tense* of a question. Not very intuitive, but a great edge! On another test, it is really not necessary to actually multiply two four digit numbers completely to rule out all but one multiple choice option). Dr. Gruber (2001) also has a book available for the SAT. A great motivation for me to practice was bringing a software tutorial to a computer lab where a beautiful woman often hung out. Hey, whatever works!

BOOKS OF POSSIBLE INTEREST	
	<a href="#"><u>Dawn Prince-Hughes, ed. (2002), <i>Aquamarine Blue 5: Personal Stories of College Students With Autism</i>, Swallow Press, ISBN: 0804010544</u></a>
	<a href="#"><u>John Harpur, Maria Lawlor, Michael Fitzgerald (2004), <i>Succeeding in College With Asperger Syndrome</i>, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, ISBN: 1843102013</u></a>
	<a href="#"><u>Ann Palmer (2005), <i>Realizing the College Dream with Autism or Asperger Syndrome: A Parent's Guide to Student Success</i>, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, ISBN: 1843108011.</u></a>

I am not going to belittle the challenge that may be involved in having the find the motivation to prepare for the test, and this is an issue that will tend to depend on the individual. Parents and/or mentors may be able to help by studying manuals and attempting to convey the information to the student in the most palatable way.

In principle, individuals with certain specific medical diagnoses (e.g., Attention Deficit Disorder [ADD]) that may coexist with autism may be eligible for extra time to complete the exam. Unfortunately, the Educational Testing Service’s (ETS) policy statement on the issue (<http://www.ets.org/distest/psyplcy.html>) is notoriously vague, and there appear to be rather onerous documentation requirements. The only condition that appears to be mentioned explicitly as a justification for accommodations is attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and an expert on special education that I consulted told me of a case of sometime with ADHD having extreme difficulty getting anywhere with the ETS. You may want to consult with a physician and/or a high school counselor. However, be prepared for a major battle!

Many FIWAs are not morning people, but unfortunately the schedulers typically have been inconsiderate enough to begin relatively early. If you have to do any kind of travel to get to the test site, that may mean having to get up especially early, and at that time, a substantial breakfast may not be that appealing. You should, however, be sure that you are well fed before you start the exam. Working on an empty stomach tends to impair performance even more than one might imagine. This point in particular is serious business!

*Grades.* Depending on the student’s age, the die may already have been cast by the time you read this. Typically, colleges will consider grades received from the ninth or tenth grades through the first semester of the senior year. Some colleges will be more diligent than others in weighing the nature of the courses, giving credit for taking the more challenging ones. Nowadays, “honors” or “advanced placement” courses may help boost a grade point average (GPA), since these courses often carry one more point (e.g., an “A” would count as 5.0, as opposed to 4.0). We will soon consider motivational issues in getting through college course work. Many of the ideas that will come up then are relevant here, too.

Many FIWAs may have accumulated certain bad grades—perhaps overall, through a frustration with school in general, or specifically in less-liked, or less understood subjects. Although the effect of these grades can be “diluted” by better performance and honors courses later, they cannot be entirely removed from the student’s record, which can be a problem in applying to more selective universities. This, of course, is a problem shared by a large proportion of “normal” peers.

Certain institutions—usually the more selective, or higher priced private schools—may require student essays, portfolios, or letters of recommendation. The first two are opportunities to show off special skills, abilities, or talents. A sympathetic teacher may be able to put a positive “spin” on a student through the latter. (The issue of whether autism and/or other conditions should be disclosed in the application is a highly individual question that I cannot address effectively in the general sense). It is worth noting here that a letter that shows itself to have been written *specifically* for the student in question will be taken more seriously than a “form” letter that gives the appearance that the recommender merely inserted the applicant’s name. *The letter should say something clearly unique about the student.* It may be particularly useful to mention specific projects and/or accomplishments. You may get some inspiration from the information I ask from my students seeking a letter (<http://www.larsperner.com/misc/ltrsor.htm>).

## Choosing a College

It is tempting to consider getting a start at a community college (CC) rather than at a university, and there are situations where this may be useful. While I have to admit that there are a lot of potential advantages to this strategy, I will be up-front about the fact that I am personally quite biased against the idea. However, this is very much an individual question, and one mother reports that her son's experience at a community college has been *very* positive. So, my bias is just that.

Temple Grandin (1985, 1996)—a hero to many of us!—has very insightfully recommended that high school students with special interests and/or greater advancement in certain subjects take courses at a CC during the school year and/or over the summer. If the student is already familiar with the CC that way, the transition may be smoother. CCs frequently are much more “forgiving” of a seemingly unimpressive high school record, and a major advantage here is that the student may be relatively free to focus on courses that interest him or her—an excellent opportunity to develop a superior GPA “unpolluted” by grades in “nuisance” subjects. A CC may also be located more conveniently, allowing the student to live at home, or at least closer to home.

However, you need to keep in mind that a CC will involve an additional transition to a *new* campus. Again, this is not a problem for everyone, but for those of us to whom the college experience is a haven, it seems a shame to “squander” an opportunity for four uninterrupted years in one place! Change has been quite uncomfortable for me, but now that I think about it, but maybe it is a good experience that will be help one move on when it is time to leave the four-year college. It should also be noted that not all course-work will transfer, so completing the degree this way may take longer. (This is especially the case if the student takes special interest courses, as opposed to those aimed at filling the general education requirements, since there is a greater chance that a university will not allow transfer credit for courses whose content is not clearly identifiable as part of the general education curriculum).

The quality of instruction at both CCs and four year colleges varies widely, so it is difficult to say whether substantive learning will suffer. Students will probably get more individual attention at a community college than they would at a research oriented university where many of the freshman and sophomore courses are taught in the infamous four hundred student lecture halls. The flip side of the lower level of competition that enables a student to get good grades is that he or she may be unprepared for what is to come. Finally, community colleges, deservedly or not, frequently carry a sort of stigma and presumption of mediocrity among college students. This is the last thing a fragile self-esteem needs!

One option is to consider a technical program, or trade school, rather than a traditional university education. Here, the student will have the opportunity to focus more explicitly on his or her interests. It may be possible to learn some technical skills that would be highly valued in industry, so this could be a good career move. It is my personal bias—a natural one for a college professor—is that this does not provide the same opportunity to become a “well rounded” person, but if it allows one to focus on passionate interests, that may ultimately be most important. To paraphrase Mark Twain, one should not let school get in the way of an education.

The military does offer a number of great technical programs, but it is probably painfully obvious that the military aspect would not be very suitable for most HFIWAs...

A number of factors relevant to the neurotypical population—both the boring majority and the thin ranks of worthy ones—have significance for us, too, in selecting a college. One, obviously, is cost. Cost is not determined entirely by the “sticker” tuition price alone. It is affected, too, by any scholarships received as well as the cost of room, board, and other expenses. (By the way, textbook prices may provide quite a “sticker shock!”) For reasons discussed below, it may be dangerous to rely on a scholarship, which may be lost or reduced in the event of uneven academic performance.

The highly intelligent HFIWA may well be attracted to some of the more prestigious schools that seem to boast of attracting the best and the brightest—a group to which many of us have a strong claim to membership. The trouble with some of these schools is, of course, that many of them are highly research oriented, a situation that tends to foster little individual attention to the individual student. Even the graduate students who teach many of the courses may be too busy with research to give any one student much attention. (This is the case even in some private institutions with twenty-thousand-plus annual tuitions!) And the infamous lecture halls with several hundred students are likely to be a frequent experience. Some individuals will, of course, relish in the anonymity and seeming freedom that this situation provides, but exam time may provide a sobering reality check.

Many private colleges provide significantly smaller classes and more individual attention. However, the price tag can be quite prohibitive, often approaching or exceeding twenty thousand a year, *before* we add room and board. Their course offerings may, of course, be more limited. Without getting *too* alarmed, also realize that meager library holdings could prove quite a disappointment for those consumed with special interests that, for some strange reason, are not matched in intensity by librarians (who have a severely misguided propensity to “stretch” their budgets among other subjects, too).

A number of public teaching oriented universities may provide a good solution. I was fortunate to go to the Cal Poly, which provided an excellent quality of education. A guidance counselor may be able to offer some good advice on available options within an acceptable distance from home.

For a list of colleges that responded to a survey I sent out about their services and experiences working with students on the autistic spectrum, see <http://www.larsperner.com/autism/colleges.htm>.

## Coping With College Course Work

Now, let's examine challenges that the HFIWA may face. First of all, we have to consider why we are talking about college in the first place. Some individuals—for example, those who had an all-consuming interest in video games—may see college as little more than a “ticket” to a job as a computer programmer. This individual will likely face some rather serious adjustment issues. Others of us are *thinkers* who are driven more by a curiosity, or we may recognize academics—by default—as the domain in which we have been most successful all along. And others—probably including the vast majority of neurotypicals as well—have little idea what goes on in college, but it is “natural” thing for individuals from upper middle class families to do at time (and I would be the last to discourage that idea!)

Understanding our motivation for going to college will help make informed decisions. A big problem faced by many bright HFIWAs is a very uneven distribution of intellectual abilities. One young man, for example, had an excellent understanding of “hard” science, but had considerably more difficulty in more “big picture,” socially oriented subjects. He simply could not explain the significance of a major historical character about whom he had just read a complete book. This could be a problem because almost all colleges have certain “general education” requirements (let me hasten to “confess” up front that I am big believer in general education myself!)

Sometimes, it may be possible to fulfill requirements in creative ways—e.g., I was able to fulfill an “art/music/theater” requirement by taking a course in computer graphics. A well crafted and reasonable petition for “deviation from curriculum” might also pave a route around a particularly disliked course. That is, one might propose that, given one's interests and/or career plans, a different course would be valuable than one specified in the requirements for a particular major—e.g., one could ask to take a course in logic, offered by the Philosophy Department, rather than an introductory philosophy course. The proposal would have to be reasonable and not “smack” of an attempt to circumvent an unpopular course. (Petitions to avoid a public speaking course will likely be scrutinized rather

thoroughly!)

For the most part, breadth requirements are here to stay, so let's look at how we can tackle the obstacles that they will eject. Autism is often described as a culture, so we can think of "obstacle" courses as "foreign." We now have to make a determination as to whether to see them as hostile enemies or troops that could, with the right strategy, be at least partially pacified.

"Suspect" courses can taunt the HFIWA by way of at least three, often interrelated, sets of problems. First, there is the simple question of *motivation*. To many of us—"normal" or not—some courses are simply not interesting enough to warrant, in their own right, the amount of effort that they require. That is why, although the income potential there is relatively great, only a minority of students major in accounting or aeronautical engineering. For a person with autism, some courses—particularly those time consuming ones that take precious time away from what is *really* interesting—are just not that inviting. In my own case, I always seemed to be able to find "nuggets" of fascinating stuff in each course I took—even when it was far from my favorite—but I will grant this will not be the case for everyone. So we will have to develop a plan to cope—more about that shortly.

The second problem is that of ability. Again, the HFIWA is by no means in a boat of his or her own here (although it may often seem so!) There were many neurotypicals in college who struggled as much with math as I did, with little more reward. Math was never really central to what I wanted to do, but as I decided to go for my Ph.D., I realized that I would need some advanced statistics courses.

It is important to realize that someone who is generally quite bright and hard working may have particular difficulty in some areas. So we must make some choices and consider how we can best get through obstacles that we cannot navigate around. I did take some math courses while keeping a relatively low course load, and ultimately my lack of math background was probably one of the factors that kept me out of Stanford and MIT—but I did end up with a decent Ph.D. and I am (no longer!) complaining.

Finally, then, there is the problem of pain and frustration that emerges as we combine the two types of problems above. We know that HFIWAs are often vulnerable to depression and self-doubt (and in fact, I was diagnosed with depression long before my autism was ever realized). Thus, again, we must *plan* for how we can best prepare ourselves for, and inoculate ourselves against, the problems before they arise. Again, let me emphasize that although these problems may be more severe and acute in the case of the HFIWA, they are not unique.

Now, how can we prepare for the academic side of the college challenge? At this point, I will be very honest and say that as unfair as it is, money will make things a lot easier. Financial flexibility means that one does have to rush to graduate as quickly and that one will not have to be detracted by having to work one's way through school.

Consider the problem of motivation. A student may be interested in computer programming and little else. English and philosophy courses are just not that motivating. How can one respect someone like Shakespeare, anyway? The bozo didn't even know how to program in BASIC, let alone make a simple Java script!

Parents *could* come down very hard and say that the student "has" to devote a certain minimum number of hours to certain courses. They could make vivid threats of quite a severe punishment for non-compliance. Some kind of firmness will probably be necessary, but there is also a very real limit to how successful it is likely to be—the disciplinarian is, after all, probably not going to be around to "enforce" these study habits. Realistically speaking, however frightening, the enforcer's power comes into play when it is too late.

Therefore, what I will tell some parents outright is that if it is economically feasible, it will help to build in some "circuit breakers." For an individual who aspires to get into a competitive graduate program, or one who hopes to be hired by certain firms, consistent good grades are essential. However, in some cases, it is probably better to be realistic up front and set up a "tolerable" plan of performance.

Course structures vary somewhat between colleges, but suppose that an institution offers predominantly three "credit" courses (typically, fifteen credits, or "hours," are considered a full time load). With a total five courses in a given term, it is important to "balance" the load between "rewarding" and "drudgery" courses. What I outright told one mother, whose son was primarily interested in computer science, was that if he took three computer courses and two general education courses a term and got "A's" and "B-plusses" in his three computer courses, he would just need to get a "C" in one general education course and could, if need be, outright fail the other one without getting on academic probation. Truth be told, it frequently does not take much to get a "C" in many general education courses. It is important to note here, however, that a lot of students are "screened out" during their freshman and sophomore years, so this strategy is expressly contingent on having "compensatory" motivating courses in which one can do well.

If one has to rely on taking a reduced course load, or retaking courses not passed on the first attempt, this will obviously increase the time needed to finish college and therefore the expense, so I am not going to beat around the bush that privilege is quite helpful here. This problem is compounded for the student dependent on scholarships that carry an expectation by the grantors of consistent excellence.

The strategy of "selective excellence" described above naturally imposes certain constraints on the student's choice of available schools for two reasons. First, the need "compensate" grade-wise in favored subjects may mean that the student would have to settle for a less selective institution than what would match his or her areas of strength. For example, even if a student could match MIT or Cal Tech students in technical subjects, out-excelling them as a means to compensate for poor performance in other courses would probably not be realistic—the students there are, after all, close to superhuman anyway. Another consideration is the rigidity of the way in which a school's curriculum is sequenced. Many institutions, for example, tend to place a great deal of the less motivating general education courses during the first two years. Therefore, students may take few if any courses in their majors before their junior year. Schools that maintain such policies often do this with the best of intentions, since students frequently do not yet "know" what they want to study or "do" when they arrive. But roads constructed with that kind of pavement may lead to poorly climate controlled destinations.

My college was widely criticized for requiring freshpersons to declare a major upon application for admission, with the majority actually changing their majors before graduating. But it meant that students were usually immersed into the subjects of their majors early on, allowing them to experience whether this was really what they wanted to do. This structure does mean, however, that if a student changes interests, graduation is more likely to be delayed, and for a longer period of time. Again, as unfair as it may be, even if one is to accept the rather questionable assumption that money can't buy happiness, it sure does help alleviate a lot of problems.

One unpleasant reality—for some of us, anyway—of college nowadays is that there seems to be a great deal of group work assigned. Ugh! To the HFIWA, this can be sheer terror, and I am grateful that truly hideous trend had not caught on as much back when I was in college. There is a great deal to learn from working with other people, but I rather doubt that college course work is a constructive venue. Student motivations vary tremendously, so the more naïve, brainy person may get stuck with a disproportionate amount of work. Work sessions may be scheduled at odd hours, and a tendency for a group to procrastinate may make the last minute struggles particularly stressful. And then there is the question of agreeing on substance. I can't say that I ever thought very favorably of those neurotypicals whose thick skulls prevented them from seeing the correctness—let alone the unquestionable moral superiority—of my views. I don't honestly know what to recommend here. It is possible—though I doubt that such an attempt would entail smooth sailing—that someone truly distressed might be allowed to work alone, but I am not optimistic.

## Moving Away to College and Pragmatics

For some HFIWAs, academics are the *easy* stuff, and the *real* trouble involves moving away from home and coping with the pragmatics of independent and group living. As I indicated earlier, I had less experience here myself since I was able to live at home until my mother moved right before my senior year. But I can offer some “arm-chair” perspective. And, again, many “ordinary” students will face many of the same problems.

For those going to a college “far away” (a term that will have different meanings to different people), one of the problems is that the transition is so abrupt. You leave one day, arriving perhaps a week before the start of the term. And many of the other pressures are likely to start at the same time.

Here, again, privilege can help ease, but not entirely eliminate, the problem. If a student is within driving distance, feels comfortable driving, and has a car, he or she can have the assurance of being able to come home—if he or she feels the urge to do so—every week-end if need be. The beauty of a safety net is that its existence does not mean that it actually has to be used—but it can go a long way in quelling anxiety. Again, if economically feasible, it might be possible to schedule classes only on two days a week during the first semester, so that there is the knowledge that “escapes” *can* be for a longer duration. For those who live farther away from home, open-ended bus, train, or plane tickets or vouchers, for those who can afford them, can provide a real sense of security.

The telephone, although not quite as comforting, is a much more egalitarian tool. It is possible to buy pre-paid phone cards that cost three cents or less per minute. Even if one never takes advantage of it, it is a relief to know that you can take a cue from ET and call home for an hour every day for less than sixty dollars per month! (This may, of course, be less of a relief to the family member who may be on the receiving end of a long, daily call, but that is another matter.)

One very important issue is living arrangements. Traditionally, most students have tended to live in university residence halls during their first year or two of college. It makes sense that someone new to a campus would like to live on campus and not have to “scrounge” for housing. However, it is easy to visualize how disastrous a residence hall can be to the HFIWA. Having to share a room with someone else (a reality in most residence halls), lack of privacy in bathrooms, and the crowded and noisy quarters sound quite hellish, and I am glad I never had to go through that experience. Cafeteria food may or may not be a problem. At least there is frequently a lot of choice, and you don’t have to prepare the food yourself.

Living off campus raises other concerns. Roommate problems—often quite severe—abound even among ordinary students, and the HFIWA may be quite vulnerable to exploitation. It may not be possible to afford a private apartment for the student, and even where this is a possibility, living alone may become *too* lonely for the HFIWA.

If the student has friends from high school going to the same college, it may help to “join up” with someone the student already knows, but unfortunately, these others are frequently headed for dormitories. And then there is the question of food preparation, let alone house-holding skills. I can’t offer a lot of advice here.

My own experience in college was by and large quite positive, so it came as a bit of a rude awakening when it was suggested to me that college can be quite depressing for those who have trouble coping, either in the academic or social sense. While some of us would find the idea of missing even a single class abhorrent, others may withdraw to their home quarters for long periods of time. Therefore, a regular “check-in” system with a “buddy” of sorts has been suggested. A word of warning here: The idea must be presented the HFIWA—who is likely to be rather weary of this kind of “intrusion” or “loss of freedom”—in a manner that makes it as palatable as possible.

## Securing Needed Services

Individuals with autism vary tremendously in the help and services they will need to function effectively, and colleges differ a great deal in what they offer.

The issue arises as to how much a student should disclose to his or her professors, and what, if any, accommodations he or she should request. This is an individual matter, and the answer will vary depending on the individual case and the student’s relative desire for privacy. Theoretically, in the United States, the *Americans With Disabilities Act* requires educational institutions and employers to provide the disabled with “reasonable accommodations.” In practice, however, the act has been described as lacking “teeth” and exactly what it mandates is not at all clear. Many universities explicitly require that any special accommodations must be requested through the disabled student services office rather than directly to a professor. The type of campus involved is likely to make a significant difference. Faculty in small liberal arts colleges are likely to be a lot more accommodating than those in big research institutions, where teaching and individuals are more likely to be seen as obstacles to research.

Most colleges offer *some* counseling services, which are often quite in demand among a large proportion of students struggling to adjust to various phases of college life. These counseling services may or may not have staff experienced in dealing with HFIWAs and even when they do, students may be eligible for only a small number of sessions. University health centers vary somewhat in what kinds of required medical services they may offer.

Special accommodations for the classroom tend to vary. Budget limitations may make it difficult to get a note-taker for those who have difficulty with this task, and few HFIWAs would be comfortable asking others for their notes. (The very thought makes me cringe!) Fortunately, more and more professors (especially the “with-it” ones like me!) are preparing their slides in PowerPoint and posting the files online. On a more positive note, an increasing number of colleges now offer students with various learning disabilities the opportunity to take exams in a quieter environment rather than in the classroom.

One problem that haunts a large proportion of people in all walks of life is organization—keeping track of meeting times, due dates, and paperwork. Individuals on the autistic spectrum often fall into one extreme or the other—and sometimes, we may fall on opposite extremes in different tasks. Although I have not been successful in all areas, I have found that I have been able to impose a certain orderliness on myself, and one of my fondest tools is a large number of three ring binders. Unfortunately, professors will often provide handouts that lack punched holes. The truly proud “geek” will gladly carry around a hole puncher, but for those less dedicated, it essential to have plenty of “pocket” inserts in the binders to temporarily hold handouts.

Liane Holliday Willey, in an appendix to her excellent book *Pretending to Be Normal*, provides additional suggestions on accommodations and services that may be desirable. You may also want to check out the British based support page for university students with Asperger’s Syndrome at <http://www.cns.dircon.co.uk/index.html>.

## Moving Beyond College

The stereotype of the “professional student” is present even in the neurotypical community, and as frightening as it sounds, many people have to move on. Some of us are fortunate enough to have the opportunity to become professors, but that may not be what some HFIWAs want anyway—then you have to deal with those pesky students, for example! Some of them treat our course as no more important than any other! (It gives *me* a “kick” to have people who actually *pay* to hear me talk about my favorite subjects, so I like teaching, but I can understand that not everyone will). Graduation can “creep” up on you, and while many ordinary students rise well to the milestone, it can be quite frightening to those who eschew change.

Temple Grandin, and many professionals in the field, recommend that students get practical experience as early as high school. This may sound as frightening to many others on the autistic spectrum as it does to me, but I have to accept the practical wisdom of the advice. Many times, internships can help one get a foot “inside” a firm, potentially paving the way for post-graduation employment. There is often less risk in taking on an intern, so firms may be more willing

to take someone who comes across as “a little strange,” and thus the student has the opportunity to present himself or herself as a competent and reliable asset to the firm. If employment that matches special interests can be found, it may even be that someone will finally find the deserved appreciation on the job! Note, however, that internships take time and energy, which should be budgeted for in the course load. In particular, work that involves a lot of human interaction—or other sensory stimulation—can be quite tiring.

Even ordinary students can benefit tremendously from training for meetings with potential employers and going through “mock” interviews. In the case of the HFIWA, however, it may be more essential than for most to focus on personal mannerisms, and where interviews may involve a meal, some special tutoring in dining etiquette may be indicated.

Employment interviews—particularly those held on campus as recruiters visit—often take place in makeshift accommodations, and it may be useful to experience a “mock” interview in a matching environment. In my case, preliminary interviews for faculty positions have often been held in hotel rooms during conferences. While eye contact is challenging enough for me when people are sitting next to each other at a table, things become infinitely worse when a group of interviewers are spread around a more than a 180 degree span of chairs, sofas, and beds within a room.

#### Conclusion

As we have seen, the similarities between the challenges facing the HFIWA and the “neurotypical” counterpart are perhaps greater than the differences. Nevertheless, those of us on the autistic spectrum do face challenges which are frequently qualitatively different and may take on greater magnitudes. For a variety of reasons discussed in this essay, it is especially important to begin preparations for college—both academically and psychologically—at a much earlier time. Realistically, not everyone will find college the joy that I did, and for those who see college more as a means to an end, I hope the strategies discussed here will make this phase as manageable and successful as possible.

Again, each person is different, and plans must take this into consideration.

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