

PEER TO PEER

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Talking with Professors

Many new college students have to adjust to living on their own for the first time, taking hard classes, following complex schedules, making friends and meeting deadlines. For some students, learning to communicate with professors is another new skill to learn. Without immediate access to the supports you had in high school, like teachers, counselors, and/or family, it is an important time to learn to advocate for yourself both inside and outside of the classroom.

Self-Advocacy

One major challenge for students on the spectrum in college is not the courses but navigating the social environment that is part of college courses. Unlike in high school, students with a disability must provide proof of their disability to the disability services office themselves. Many times, they must also notify each professor individually of their approved accommodations and supports. While asking for help is a vital skill necessary for adulthood, it can be difficult for young adults in general, but especially for some students on the spectrum who struggle with social and communication skills. On the next pages are steps and helpful tips for communicating with your professors before classes begin. It is always best to advocate for yourself as a preventative step before you face a challenge.



Recognize Challenges

Remember, college is hard, and many students face challenges. It is important to check in with yourself about how things are going.

Ask for Help

Reach out to someone if you need help. Depending on the challenge and your comfort level, you can talk to residential assistants in the dorm, other students, friends, family members, or professors for help.





First Steps Upon Arriving at College

1 Register with Your College's Disability Services Center

The requirements may vary by school, but you typically need documentation of your disability from a doctor or mental health counselor to receive services. You will need to fill out a form with your requested needs and accommodations.

2 Consider Your Goals

Read through the syllabus for the class (which is usually made available to you before classes begin) and think about what will be easy for you and what might be more challenging. Ask yourself, what are the potential challenges that might arise in this course that I can discuss with my professor before they even begin? Jot down notes to make sure that you remember everything you want to say to your professor when you meet.

3 Set Up a Meeting with Your Professor Before Classes Begin

You can set up a meeting with your professor either by email or in person. You can usually find the professor's email and other contact information on their syllabus. If you are nervous about meeting with the professor one-on-one, then ask someone to come with you. This could be a friend, classmate, or someone in the disability services office.

Sample Email

Hi, my name is _____, and I am in your _____ class. I am a ____-year student studying _____. I was wondering if I could set up a meeting with you during the first week of classes to discuss my disability and my academic needs with you. I really appreciate your time and consideration on this matter. I look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Best, _____ (your name)



Know and Use Available Resources

Make sure you are looped into the resources available on campus. Do not be afraid to use the resources for the short or long-term - that is why they are available.

Celebrate Successes

Be sure to recognize and celebrate your successes in college. Reward yourself for things like talking to your professor or turning an assignment in on time.



Having the Discussion: Tips for Meeting with Your Professor

- **Assume the best!** Set an optimistic and problem-solving tone and assume that your professors are willing to support you. By coming to them for help and being an advocate for yourself, you will make a good first impression.
- **Act professionally.** Be polite and respectful when you meet. Since this is your first meeting, consider dressing more professionally than you might for regular class.
- **Explain the reason for your visit.** Explain the basics of your disability using simple terms. Some students choose not to share that they have autism but choose just to focus on specific accommodations. That is your choice.
- **Don't apologize.** It is your right to receive accommodations, so you don't have to feel bad for requesting them.
- **Allow for pauses in the conversation.** There is no need to rush the conversation. Your professors need time to absorb what you are sharing. Pauses also allow time for them to ask follow-up or clarifying questions. If you tend to talk quickly when you are nervous, you can say something like "Sorry, I tend to talk quickly when I am nervous. I am trying to slow down."
- **Offer resources.** Some professors may not have knowledge of or experience with autism. You can ask if they would like you to send resources with more information. There is a list of resources at the end of this document.
- **Wrap up the meeting.** At the end of your meeting, thank the professor for taking time out of their day to meet with you. Give them your contact information such as your school email address. Tell them that you will continue to communicate your needs with them and other problems that may arise throughout the semester. If you are comfortable, tell your professor that you are open to receiving their feedback and that you want to know how you can be more successful in their class.

Accommodations and Supports During the Semester

Below are examples of potential accommodations and supports that you can request:

- Step-by-step, clearly written instructions for projects and assignments. Make sure to check the syllabus and course materials for rubrics or guidelines as well
- Repetition of instructions in order to verify comprehension when needed
- Short breaks during class if needed
- Submitting your assignments electronically or in an alternate format
- Visual supports to help promote your understanding
- Working with a partner or tutor outside of class
- Extended time on tests to account for processing delays or separate test setting so you can avoid distractions and move around if necessary





Additional Resources

Achieving in Higher Education

<http://www.aheadd.org/>

Achieving in Higher Education is an organization that supports students with various disabilities in the college setting and teaches them self-advocacy skills. The organization provides trainings to high school and university faculty, organizations and employers. Once a student is accepted into a college, they may apply to AHEADD online or support services. Tuition assistance is available for their services for those who qualify.

Autism Speaks Transition Toolbox

<http://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits/transition-tool-kit>

Autism Speaks assists families with children with autism navigate social, educational and occupational aspects of life. Tool kits address community, family, school and emergency issues. The site also provides valuable legal information to families.

Think College: College Options for People with Intellectual Disabilities Achieving in Higher Education

<http://www.thinkcollege.net/>

This national organization is dedicated to improving the opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) in higher education. The site features modules intended to inform students with ID and their families on the transition to college. It also provides a database of post-secondary institutions that offer services or programs for individuals with ID and has links to numerous informational articles on higher education opportunities.

Autistic Self Advocacy Network

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/resources/>

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network is a nonprofit advocacy organization run by and for individuals on the autism spectrum. ASAN advocates for the inclusion of autistic people in decisions that affect them including legislation, depiction in the media, and disability services.



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