



ADVICE

# What It's Like to Send Your Autistic Kid Off to College

Advice to colleges from a parent who has spent years doing research on campus neurodiversity programs.

By [Matt Gunter](#) December 17, 2024



KEITH NEGLEY FOR THE CHRONICLE

*This essay is excerpted from a new Chronicle special report, “The Neurodiverse Campus,” available in the [Chronicle Store](#).*

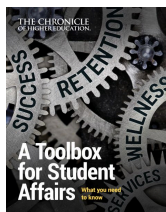
In August, when we moved our oldest child, Peter, into his dorm room, we faced all the usual questions that parents fret over when their first child goes to college: Will he like his classes? Will he get along well with his roommates? And, of course, will he ever do his laundry or make his bed? But we also faced a set of not-so-typical questions about this rite of passage.

Our son was diagnosed with high-functioning autism at age 8. Peter is many other things, too, of course — intelligent, fun-loving, hard-working. He definitely has the ability to succeed in college. However, Peter also realizes that he has thrived in the past, in part, due to some extra support, particularly with organizational and executive-functioning skills. So we wondered: Will he get that quality of support in college? Will it be enough? Will he be able to handle the bureaucracy of a large university?

August 9 was more than just college drop-off day. It was actually the culmination of a three-year process of research and reflection for Peter and our family, figuring out his post-high-school options and exploring the resources available on some college campuses to autistic and neurodivergent students. In the spirit of paying it forward, I felt compelled to share what we've learned about this little corner of higher education. I recently started a YouTube channel, "[Inclusive Academia](#)," for which I've interviewed dozens of directors of campus neurodiversity-support programs as well as experts on topics such as college preparedness, accommodations, and student privacy.

At the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, where Peter is in his first year, he has access to its Autism Support Program, a robust auxiliary system that offers structure and assistance in areas including academics, executive functioning, housing, and social connections. Programs like the one at Arkansas have been popping up across higher education over the last decade in response to the increased matriculation of neurodivergent students.

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I dived into those issues as a concerned parent, and don't consider myself an expert. But I have spent a lot of time thinking about the best fit for students like our Peter. In what follows, I aim to share with college administrators five of our family's lessons and insights on this front.

### **It makes good business sense for colleges to support neurodivergent students.**

Studies have shown that dropout rates among neurodivergent college students are significantly higher than for the general population, at a time when campuses are facing a projected "[enrollment cliff](#)" and need every student they can get and keep.

Appropriately supporting those students will almost certainly raise their retention and graduation rates. That was echoed in a recent survey I conducted, in partnership with the College Autism Network, of program directors on the topic of college preparedness of neurodiverse students. Two attributes that the student must bring to the table, said a program director in the survey, are "motivation to complete college and willingness to seek and accept help." But if a neurodiverse student "wants to be there and is open to help," the director added, "everything else can be supported/developed" with the right mix of campus support programs.

Additionally, campuses that lack formal neurodiversity programs may be missing an opportunity to attract new students. In our family's case, while Peter really wanted to attend a large university with strong STEM programs and Division I sports, he also understood how he would benefit from an autism-support program. Peter grew up a die-hard fan of a flagship state university just 45 minutes from where we live, in Kansas, but ultimately didn't even apply to that institution because it had no autism-support program.

For institutions looking to create such a program, the College Autism Network offers a low-cost seminar, "[Square One](#)," that essentially provides a blueprint.

**Make it easier to get information online.** The information-gathering process can be difficult and confusing if an institution doesn't have a formal autism-support program. Most institutions don't, although nearly all of them have offices of disability or accessibility services. However, we often could not find much detailed information on their websites.

Some campus disability offices — based on what they say about themselves online — seem to focus primarily on helping neurodivergent students obtain academic accommodations. They may well be quite active in other areas — such as in arranging housing, counseling and mental-health support, tutoring and writing centers, and even coaches or peer mentors — but many didn't offer such details on their websites.

Each time we called a campus disability office, we found an in-depth conversation was vital because some of the nuance was not spelled out on its website. Colleges could save themselves — not to mention prospective students and their parents — a lot of frustration by simply being clear online about their neurodiversity services.

**The fees many autism-support programs charge could be prohibitive for some families.** The programs that I've encountered operate as self-sustaining entities, meaning they must fund their own budgets by charging fees. Our family expects to pay an additional \$40,000 over Peter's four years for the support services he will receive as an undergraduate. We see it as a good investment in his future, but it's a significant sum that many families cannot afford.

Some institutions have found donors to underwrite those programs so that students can get the services free of charge. But free programs seem to be the exception, not the rule.

Higher education needs to consider alternative funding sources for such services, to make them more affordable for more students who could benefit.

**On-campus housing is a major consideration for neurodiverse students.** Like many institutions, the Fayetteville campus does not have enough room to guarantee students on-campus housing after their first year. Fortunately, the Autism Support Program has an arrangement with university housing that guarantees to any student in the program the

option of on-campus housing for all four years. Students in the program generally live together in multibedroom suites with common areas, affording both the privacy of an individual living space to recharge and the exposure to a common living area for socialization.

Many U.S. institutions have a shortage of campus housing. But neurodivergent students often have sensory issues, limited transportation, and/or social anxiety that make housing a critical factor in their initial consideration of college options and their ultimate success there. Housing accommodations are a significant factor in a neurodiverse student's final enrollment decision, as was the case for Peter.

**Even with a bachelor's degree, many autistic college graduates struggle to find gainful employment in their fields.** Many companies have discovered the extraordinary benefits of hiring neurodivergent employees, who bring unique perspectives and skill sets to the workplace. In many cases, however, autistic students may need extra support with interviewing and other job-seeking skills that are critical to landing their first position.

Here are some ways that your institution can help neurodiverse students with their transition to the work world:

- Train people in the campus career-services office on how to better interact with and aid neurodivergent students. Some career-services offices have job-skills, career-planning, and interviewing workshops specifically designed for such students.
- Establish internships for neurodiverse students with private employers and government entities, ranging from small local businesses to Fortune 500 companies. Some institutions already do so, and even offer on-campus internships in areas such as information technology.
- Several leading companies (Microsoft, JP Morgan Chase, EY, Dell, and Southwest Airlines, to name a few) have made neurodiverse hiring a major corporate initiative, and some campus autism programs have forged strong ties with those and other companies.

At the turn of the century, programs for neurodiverse students were few and far between. Today, scores are up and running, with new ones forming every year. The programs provide the scaffolding required for this rich and talented group of young people to excel on a college campus and then contribute their immense skills to the work force and to the world after graduation. Our family feels blessed that American higher education is increasingly embracing and supporting neurodivergent students.

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

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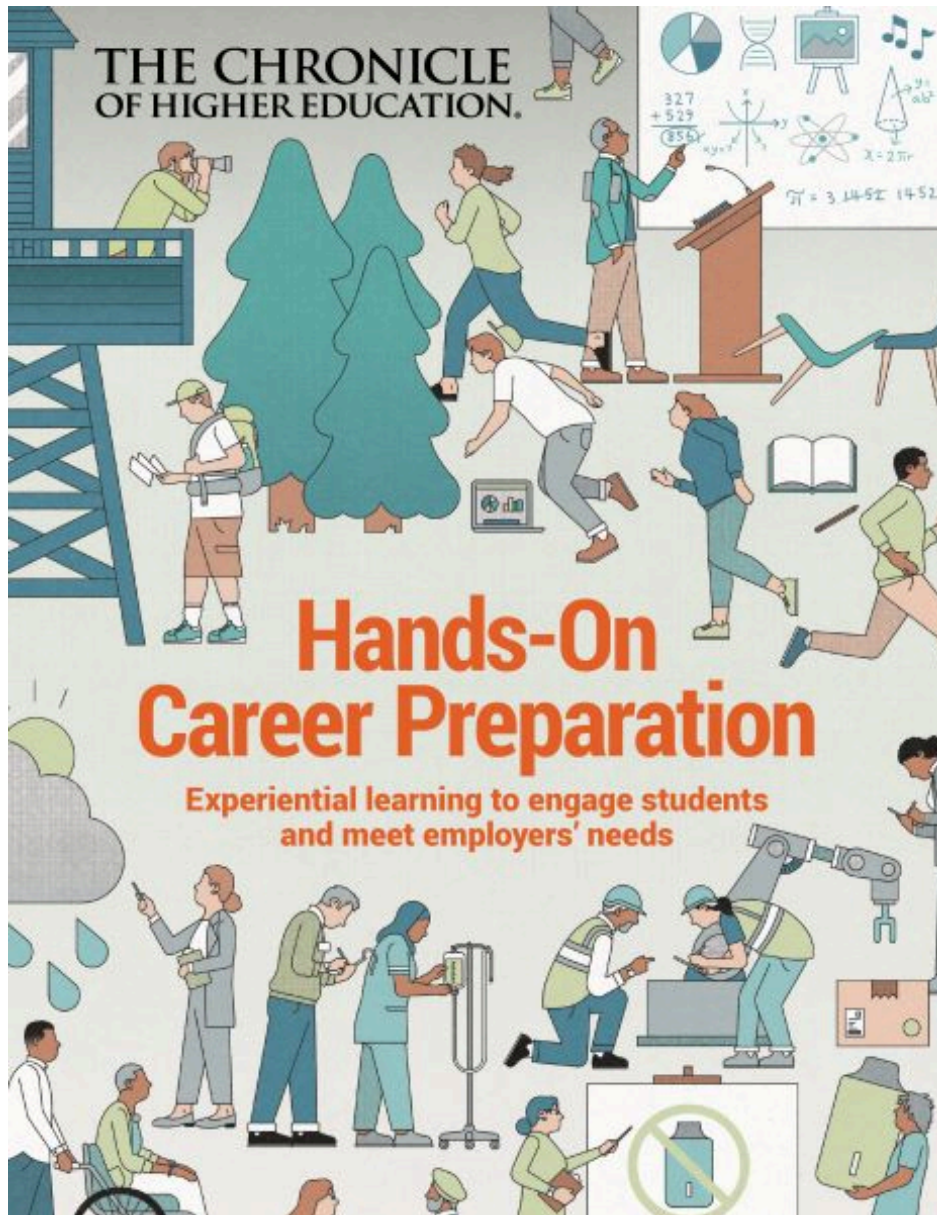


About the Author

## Matt Gunter

Matt Gunter is creator and host of [Inclusive Academia](#), a YouTube channel for neurodiverse high-school students and their families who are exploring their educational and career options. He recently collaborated with the College Autism Network to conduct a survey of autism-program directors on the college readiness of neurodiverse students. The survey results are available at [College-ready.com](#).

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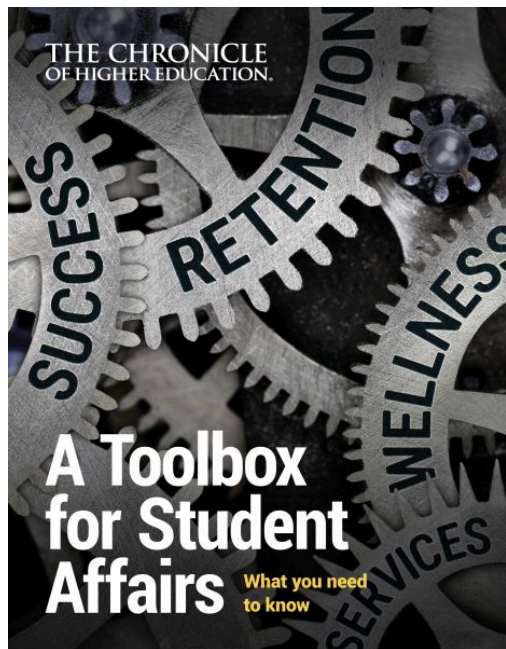
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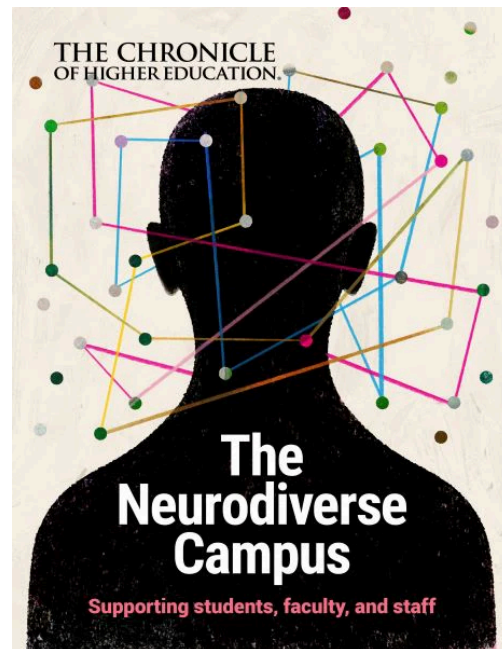
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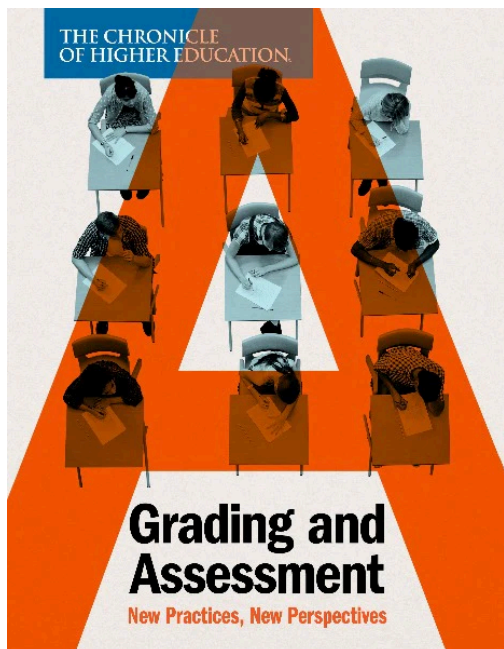
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