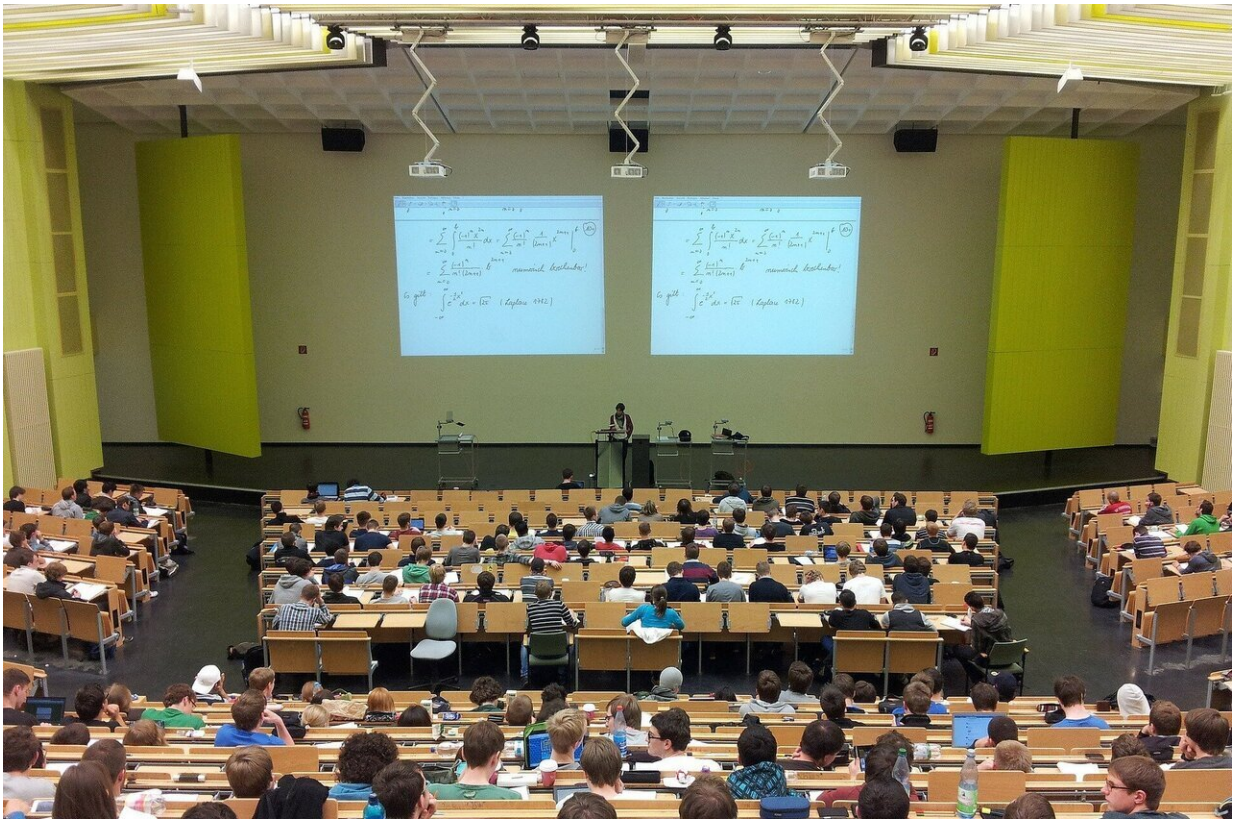


7 strategies to help gifted autistic students succeed in college

January 11 2024, by Joseph Madaus, Nicholas Gelbar and Sally Reis



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

About [1 out of every 100](#) students in American public schools has autism. A subset of these students also have academic gifts and talents in a broad range of areas, including math, science, technology, the

humanities, and the arts. These students are often referred to as "[twice exceptional](#)."

To learn more about this population, we [conducted research with three groups](#): twice-exceptional autistic [college students](#), their parents, and college staff who work with them. The students were all enrolled in or recent graduates of competitive and very competitive colleges, including Ivy League institutions. We identified several strategies that can help these students transition to and succeed in college.

1. Identify both autism and giftedness

Identifying twice-exceptional students can be difficult because their gifts may mask their disabilities. Conversely, their disabilities may mask their gifts.

One student stated, "My mother was told that I was too smart to have a disability, so I did not really believe that I had a disability."

When these students are identified only as autistic, they may be placed in special education programs that focus on the remediation of deficits rather than encouraging students to develop and build upon their strengths. They might not be enrolled in challenging courses. On the other hand, when gifted autistic students are identified only as gifted, they might not receive the support needed to accommodate their disabilities.

The students in our research project discussed how important it was for both their [academic success](#) and [self-confidence](#) to be [appropriately identified](#). One student stated: "I had an amazing teacher who gave me opportunities to participate in projects. One of my mentors was a science teacher, and she also gave me advanced opportunities. She gave me so many chances for advanced work. She let me apply science to the real

world, and to me, that was beautiful. She gave me the confidence to know that I could go beyond and do extra work."

2. Take challenging courses

Nearly every student and parent stated that college attendance was an expectation from an early age. To prepare for this goal, students took challenging courses focused on their strengths.

For example, of the students we interviewed, nearly three-quarters were enrolled in Advanced Placement, honors or college credit-bearing courses while in high school.

3. Pursue extracurricular activities

Almost every student participated in at least one extracurricular activity and some in multiple activities.

Many of the students assumed leadership roles. One parent discussed how her son tutored his peers in high school and was seen as a leader. "He was a role model there," the parent told us. "He had a lot of friends, and people really looked up to him and respected him. ... He built his [self-esteem](#), which really made a big difference."

Both the students and parents discussed the importance of these activities as ways to pursue areas of interest, gain leadership experiences, and find peers with similar interests.

About half of the students participated in residential camp or program experiences while in high school. They described how these programs helped them prepare to live away from home during college. One student said such programs "really helped, as it helped my ability to

communicate with others and helped me to understand how to explain what I need to explain to others."

4. Be aware of factors in choosing a college

The [students reported](#) that they were active participants in selecting their college. Finding a school with a program or major of interest was their biggest consideration.

Slightly less than half of the students interviewed started at a smaller school or a smaller regional campus before transferring to their final college or university. These smaller schools were often closer to home, enabling students to adjust to college life before they moved to their final competitive college or university. One parent told us that the family looked at schools that they could reach in two hours or so. "And that is because in case he had a meltdown, I wanted him to be in an area where I could drive and calm him down," the parent said.

5. Understand differences in laws and supports

Different laws exist at the high school and college level regarding disability support. For example, special education services will not be provided in college. Students will not receive modified instruction or assessments and instead may be eligible for reasonable accommodations, such as extended test time.

Each of the groups we studied spoke about the importance of understanding these differences and what they mean for the student seeking support in college. One college staff member stressed that [high school students](#) should receive accommodations if needed, and no modifications. He also suggested students understand "what a college professor is going to expect from them and how ... parents aren't going

to contact professors."

Colleges may offer different amounts of support for disabled students. These can range from basic accommodations to specific programs that provide an individual professional to support students. Colleges cannot charge extra fees for accommodations, but they can charge students to participate in more extensive and individualized support programs. Therefore, the level of disability support that the college offered was also a common consideration.

6. Find supportive professionals

Having a go-to contact person—an adviser, counselor, teacher, or faculty member— was essential, the parents and students told us. Such professionals may recognize the students' talents, support their interests, and nurture opportunities for their growth.

One [student](#) said, "There were so many people who believed in me and gave me advanced courses and advanced independent projects. They gave me time to write short stories. They let me explore my strengths and interests."

7. Teach students to take initiative

It is important to teach students how to advocate for themselves while in high [school](#). The students we spoke with learned how to take care of their emotional and physical health through diet, exercise, meditation, music, or finding time alone to recharge and deal with stress. They were involved in a variety of clubs and extracurricular activities. They used these experiences to make friends with similar interests.

These students also learned how to request and use available campus

support and academic accommodations when needed. Many of the students stated that they wished they had more opportunities to develop these skills while in [high school](#).

One college staff member summarized: "One of the key successful skill sets is self-advocacy and being able to recognize when things are not going well and being able to speak up and say, 'I need help.' And then taking that even a step further to say, 'Not only do I need help, but here's how I need help.' So it's that level of self-awareness and then being able to articulate those needs to the right people."

Gifted autistic students have tremendous potential but too often do not have the opportunity to develop their talents. Nationwide, [only 39% of autistic students who start college finish](#), compared with [64% of all students](#).

With high expectations, support for talent development from teachers, and careful transition planning that takes a strength-based approach, gifted students with autism can succeed in competitive colleges.

Links to our research, instructional videos, and other resources are available for free on our [project website](#).

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: 7 strategies to help gifted autistic students succeed in college (2024, January 11) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-01-strategies-gifted-autistic-students-succeed.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.