ATTENDING COLLEGE WITH SOCIAL COMMUNICATION DEFICIT
INTRODUCTION

At an early age James’ was diagnosed with ADHD and General Anxiety Disorder. After struggling to succeed in a public school setting, he attended a private high school where he was able to complete his studies in 4 years and graduate with his class in the spring of 2016.

Following graduation, he decided to pursue a lifelong dream of attending college, studying Computer Science to support his growing interest in computer programming. As part of his preparation for the transition from High School to College, James took part in the NEXT STEP: College Success & Independent Living program at Judge Baker Children’s Center in Boston, MA. Designed specifically for students, ages 16-20, who present with a social communication deficit and are serious about attending college after high school, NEXT STEP consists of three Saturday day-long sessions throughout the academic year, as well as a week-long overnight dormitory experience based at Boston College.

James and his mother were willing to share their experiences with freelance health and wellness writer, Jeffrey Hodnett, in hopes that they can encourage other children with Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, Non-Verbal Learning Disorder, or related learning differences to consider higher education after graduation. Part 1 tells of James’ first-hand experiences and in part 2 we focus on his mother’s perspective of the first year away at college.

*Please note: James’ name has been changed to protect his privacy. Portions of this interview have been edited for brevity or clarity.*
HOW/WHEN DID YOU DECIDE YOU WANTED TO GO TO COLLEGE?

From a young age, I had always thought that going to college was just what a person was supposed to do. My parents had both gone to college, and I liked to learn. I had a vague idea of what I wanted to be when I grew up (a writer at first), though that shifted over time. I don’t think I made a strong mental connection between wanting to pursue a given career and attending college for it. College was just “what’s next” in my mind.

However, when my interest shifted to programming in eighth and ninth grade, I realized that I actually did need a college degree in Computer Science to have any chance of entering that field.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE THINGS YOU DID TO PREPARE YOURSELF (AND YOUR FAMILY) BEFORE GOING?

My journey to my current college was an interesting one (Author’s Note: James has transferred from the college he initially enrolled in). The college that I did end up attending at first was, to put things lightly, not a good fit for me. I started researching other colleges to transfer to that had my desired major.

During my post-freshman year summer job, I met one person who went to the college I currently attend, and his description of their academics and social life sounded like the perfect fit for me (despite some reservations I’d had based on past experience with other students.)

I did further research into the college and started applying to transfer during the fall of my sophomore year and started at my current college the next spring. This is now my second spring semester at this college, and it had everything I hoped it would: nice people, very strong academics, and many miles separating it from my old college.

HOW DID YOU END UP CHOOSING THE COLLEGE TO WHICH YOU ARE ATTENDING?

When I was starting to think about where to attend college, it was clear that I had a lot of work to do. I wasn’t very comfortable around people I didn’t personally know and even making a phone call was phenomenally stressful.

I don’t remember how I addressed the latter (it was probably a trial by fire), but attending Next Step helped a lot with the first. During those meetings, I learned practical things such as how to inform the dining staff of my allergies and how to navigate a college campus. (I also learned that sparrows are not to be trifled with: a particularly aggressive bird kept pestering me during a tour of a college campus!)
WHAT WAS THE ONE THING THAT SURPRISED YOU THE MOST WHEN YOU GOT TO COLLEGE?

I was surprised by how similar the workload was to high school. Teachers always make it sound like it’s a huge jump in difficulty. It’s really not. You just have a lot more unstructured time that you now need to manage. Additionally, teachers often said that professors won’t remind you about late work. That has not been my experience. While they usually won’t ask a student specifically, they often make announcements about late penalties for recent assignments periodically through the term, which serves as a blanket reminder for students.

DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR COURSE-LOAD DURING THE FIRST YEAR IN COLLEGE?

I think it’s very important to know your academic strengths and weaknesses. I would recommend against taking particularly difficult classes in general that first year, but if you’re particularly strong in Math (for example), it might be worth registering for a more difficult one and seeing if it’s right for you.

If you can immediately tell that it’s not, switch out of it during the first week, which is usually the add/drop period.

ARE THERE ANY PROGRAMS OR PEOPLE ON CAMPUS THAT HAVE HELPED YOU?

Yes, even when I felt confident that I understood an assignment, I found it very helpful to go to either the tutoring center or to the professor’s office hours to make sure I was 100% certain about every part of the assignment. It made completing the assignment a lot easier and a lot less stressful.

DID YOU HAVE CHALLENGES MANAGING YOUR FREE TIME OR BALANCING ACADEMIC WORK/ STUDYING WITH ALL YOUR NEW-FOUND LEISURE TIME?

Yes and no. I’ve always had some difficulties with time management, but I also tend to get everything done on time (barring sickness). I’m usually willing to sacrifice social/personal time in order to get my work done. This past year though, I started attending a club that meets twice a week, so that takes up a considerable amount of time for me. It just means I need to budget more time for homework at other times. I miss being able to play video games every night, but it’s a necessary sacrifice.

DID YOU RELY ON ANYTHING TO MAINTAIN YOUR SCHEDULE (E.G. APP ON PHONE, USE OF TIMER, MEMO FUNCTION, ALARMS ON PHONE OR COMPUTER)?

I really should have, but I didn’t. I checked the online course hubs for all my classes every day and often wrote a “to do soon” list, but I tended to lose that list shortly after writing it and instead relied on my own memory and those daily look-ups to make sure I got all my homework in on time. It really depends on what works for each person. I’m almost certain that my method of task management would be useless for most people, but what most people recommended wasn’t effective for me.
CAN YOU TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT CAMPUS LIFE?
HOW WAS THE ROOM-MATE EXPERIENCE?

Unsurprisingly, I would not recommend having a roommate during one’s first year. There are just too many ways things can go wrong, and it’s not worth having that extra unknown in play when trying to adjust to classes and to the rest of the college environment. When I first started at college, I did not have a roommate. This was intentional; numerous failed sleepovers and bad experiences at sleep-away camps had made it very clear that I could not function with a roommate for an extended period of time. Dealing with my hall-mates was difficult enough.

Second-year housing found me moving into a suite with three other people. I had my own small individual room, but I shared a common space with three other people. This was fairly tolerable, and I was largely able to avoid my suitemates if I wanted to.

I’m planning on living in a suite with three of my friends this next year because we all need the occasional solitude that a suite can provide but we also get along well enough that we can hang out in the suite’s common room together when we don’t have work to do.

HOW WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH EATING MEALS AT A DINING HALL?

For me, getting food can be a bit stressful due to my allergies (all nuts and a small assortment of fruits and vegetables). In both of my experiences, the dining staff does their best to label potential allergens in the food they put out, but it doesn’t always cover my rarer allergies. This means I often have to ask the cooks what’s in the food for my safety. I remember that I used to be terrified of asking the cooks, but it was the trip we took to a local college dining hall with Next Step that really helped me overcome my anxiety. The experience allowed me to find out what was in the food and whether it was safe for me to eat it.

I’ve had two very different experiences in the dining hall itself (beyond the food). Initially, I was often very scared to eat in the dining hall because I didn’t want to run into anyone I knew. I often left meals early and would make a concerted effort to sit at a table far away from everyone else where I was unlikely to be noticed.

Things are very different now. I have a bunch of friends at my new school and we have a group chat where we can post if we’re about to go eat or, if we’re already there, where we’re sitting. I don’t remember the last time I ate a meal completely alone. Someone usually showed up halfway through. Eating is very much a social activity for me at this point.
IN YOUR MIND, WHAT WERE THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE?

The social life is a lot different. You have to make a lot more of an effort to be social in college because you don’t see people as often. Everyone has their own classes to go to. That said, it’s pretty easy to start a conversation while waiting for class to start if you’re willing to put yourself out there.

Also, don’t feel like you have to stay with the same group of people all the time! If you don’t like them, you can easily sit somewhere else during meals and meet new people. If you do like them, they’ll probably understand that you want to expand your horizons. I know meeting new people can be stressful (I’m actually an introvert, as difficult as it may be to believe that), but there are potentially dozens of allies and friends around you at any given moment, so it’s worth talking to them. Just don’t interrupt people mid-conversation and don’t approach someone who is either reading or has earbuds in. That always means “I’m busy” or “I don’t want to talk.”

I took a risk during one of my first classes and talked with the person next to me. I met most of my current friends as a result of that conversation. Additionally, I had discovered that reaching out like that could have positive results and repeating that led to me making even more friends.

For more information about the NEXT STEP program, please contact Matthew Arnold, M.S., CCC-SLP, Co-Director of the Next Step Program at (617) 279-4119 or nextstep@jbcc.harvard.edu