

OASIS · AT A GLANCE

Post-secondary options: supportive college vs vocational training

Four-year college? Two-year certificate? Vocational rehab? Apprenticeship? Family enterprise? Some of these will change his life. Some will cost you fifty thousand dollars for a degree he will not use. Here is how to tell the difference.

BY JIM PALASTY · 13 MIN READ · ADULT TRANSITION

1 in 3

POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT

Autistic young adults who enroll in any postsecondary program within a few years of high school. The other two need a different plan and it exists.

How it works

THREE STEPS

STEP 1

Define fit



STEP 2

Compare tracks



STEP 3

Evaluate cost and load

Comparing eight post-secondary tracks

IPSE	Certificate. On-campus. Peer-supported. 1 to 4 years.
Community college	Open enrollment. Disability services. 2 years typical.
Vocational rehab	State agency. Tied to job goal. Free.
Career technical	Trade certification. 6 months to 2 years.
Apprenticeship	Paid on-the-job. Structured. Union or industry.
Adult education	Basic skills, HSE, workforce prep. Free.
Day hab + vocational	Blend of program and paid work. HCBS-funded.
Family enterprise	Build the job around him. Highest control.

A STORY WE KNOW

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Elena is 19 and did not want to leave home for a four-year school. Her mother had been holding it as the plan since Elena was seven. They visited a two-year IPSE program at a state university, a community college certificate track in medical office administration, and a family friend's coffee shop that would train Elena on a paid apprenticeship. Elena picked the coffee shop, then the medical office certificate, in that order. Two years later she has a job, a certificate, and a savings account. Her mother now describes the four-year plan as the plan I had for me.

FIT IS NOT WHAT YOU WANTED FOR HIM

What matters, at a glance

IPSE programs

Inclusive Postsecondary Education. Hundreds nationally. Non-degree certificates on a college campus with peer supports and career prep.

Community college

Open enrollment. Disability services required by ADA. Vocational certificates in trades, IT, health support, culinary.

The debt trap

Do not enroll in a four-year program he cannot complete. Federal loans in his name will follow him for decades. Read the fine print before you sign.

VR services

State Vocational Rehabilitation pays for education tied to a career goal. Apply your junior year of high school. Bring the IEP.

IPSE cycles

Some IPSE programs run multi-year admissions cycles. Apply early, apply to three, do not put all your eggs in one campus.

Alternatives

Career technical education. Apprenticeships. Day habilitation with vocational component. Family-run micro-enterprises. Adult ed certificates.

BRING THESE · CHECK AS YOU GO

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ IEP or 504 plan (most recent) | ☐ Recent evaluations (psych, OT, speech) |
| ☐ Health and medications summary | ☐ List of accommodations that have worked |
| ☐ His questions, in his voice | ☐ Your questions about support hours |
| ☐ Cost sheet: tuition, fees, transportation | ☐ Names of two current students and their families |

YOUR MOVE

When it is time to compare, here is how you build the shortlist

- 1 Sit down with him. What does he want his life to look like at 30? Job, home, hours, friends. Any of it.
- 2 List the tracks that could get him there. IPSE, community college, VR, apprenticeship, family enterprise. All of them.
- 3 Rank each track on four dimensions: fit, cost, support, distance from home.
- 4 Visit the top three in person. Not virtual. Walk the campus or the shop.
- 5 Apply to all three. Overlap timelines. Do not put all eggs in one basket.
- 6 Reassess at three months. Fit is discovered, not predicted. Adjust.

The right program has students and families who will talk to you before you enroll.

RESOURCES NAMED IN THIS POST

thinkcollege.net · <https://thinkcollege.net/>
 ahead.org · <https://www.ahead.org/>
 apprenticeship.gov · <https://www.apprenticeship.gov/>

Informational only. Not legal or medical advice. Verify current program rules before acting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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