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Students with Autism: Setting Higher Expectations for Postsecondary Education

By Alberto Migliore and Jaime Lugas

Setting expectations and goals in high school is key for a successful transition into adulthood. Postsecondary education is a particularly important goal because higher levels of educational attainment are associated with increased quality of life, including better employment outcomes. Unfortunately, the transition plans of students with autism do not often include postsecondary education as a goal.

Estimates from the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2)* showed that only 22% of students with autism had transition plans that included postsecondary vocational training as a goal. Only 23% of students had transition plans that included the goal of attending a two- or four-year college. Yet, as Table 1 shows, a substantial number of students who did not have a goal of postsecondary vocational training went on to attend postsecondary education (39%, N=1,740). Similarly, many students who did not have a goal of attending a two- or four-year college went on to attend postsecondary education (30%, N=1,260).

The relatively high number of students who went on to attend postsecondary education without having it as a goal in their transition plan indicates that high schools may underestimate the educational aptitude or aspirations of students with autism. Based on these data, it is legitimate to speculate that more students with autism might have attended postsecondary education had they been encouraged to explore this opportunity when they were in high school. Increasing the level of expectations during high school is critical for improving the quality of life of adults with autism, including their employment outcomes.

Table 1. Students with Autism who Attended Postsecondary Education, by Transition-Planning Goals

	Attended any postsecondary education					
	Yes		No		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Goal of vocational-training program						
Yes	940	60%	630	40%	1,570	100%
No	1,740	39%	2,710	61%	4,450	100%
Goal of two- or four-year college						
Yes	1,410	77%	430	23%	1,840	100%
No	1,260	30%	2,920	70%	4,180	100%

* The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2) includes data from a nationally representative sample of students with any disabilities who received special-education services and who were between the ages of 13 and 16 in December 2000. The estimates reported in this data note were based on a sample size of about 260 students with autism as identified by school districts for the NLTS2. Figures are rounded to the nearest lower decimal to protect confidentiality. More information about NLTS2 is available at www.nlts2.org/.

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