

# Guiding Adult Learners with Disabilities through Challenging Transitions in Higher Education

Tulare W. Park<sup>1</sup>, Carol Rogers-Shaw<sup>2</sup>, Kari Sheward<sup>2</sup>, and John Szabo<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania*

<sup>2</sup>*University of Dayton*

**Abstract:** Adults with disabilities face challenges during transition points in their lives, including while transitioning into and out of post-secondary education. Both learners and educators share responsibility for understanding strategies that enhance educational inclusion. Creating an inclusive learning environment provides the means for overcoming transition barriers. This paper will identify practical strategies to address disability complications at transition points. Suggested strategies that assist learners with disabilities include actionable items that learners and educators can implement. Learner strategies focus on self-disclosure, accommodation requests, and communication elements. Educator strategies focus on course design, communication, engagement, and support elements.

*Keywords:* disability, transition, inclusion strategies, neurodiversity, doctoral research

This exploration examines how the needs of neurodivergent adult learners transitioning into and out of post-secondary education can be supported by adult educators using inclusive teaching and learning practices. We discuss the specific transition needs of learners with disabilities, identify practical strategies for successful transitioning, recognize the need for inclusion of neurodivergent learners, and argue for future research on transition.

Neurodivergent adult learners can experience stigmatization, which “affects the ability to successfully transition from one phase of life where an individual may have found acceptance to another phase where inclusion is not guaranteed” (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2021, p.2). They may need assistance and resources to move from secondary school to post-secondary education to the workplace. Social justice-based approaches to adult education reveal the necessity that adult educators recognize the needs of their neurodivergent learners, particularly as more of these students are enrolling in adult education courses and programs.

## Life Transition Points

Transitioning from familiar settings, practiced roles, comfortable relationships, established daily practices, and accepted beliefs, may they be minor or significant, planned or unexpected, can be jarring and stressful, yet change can also provide opportunities (Pavlova et al., 2017; Praharso et al., 2017; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2021; Schlossberg, 2011). Moments of significant change “can be a source of personal growth and development. At the same time, life transitions can also be viewed as stressors” (Praharso et al., 2017, p. 265). Beginning post-secondary education and then leaving their studies to take their place in the workforce are two major points of transition where adult educators can assist neurodivergent learners in achieving success (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2021). The role of adult educators is important as these transition points require greater independence, yet “independence is not about doing everything for yourself but about having control over how help

is provided” (Morris, 1998, p. 10).

Schlossberg’s (2011) Theory of Transition outlines four transition components: situation, self, support, and strategies. The situations relevant to these times may include moving from a childhood home to a college campus and then to independent living and work environments as neurodivergent learners take on more adult roles and decision-making that require focusing on the self and using inner resources to cope with change. A disability can hinder one’s development of coping skills if there was excessive support and low expectations in the past, or the ability to cope may be a strength because of the necessity to compensate for a disability throughout one’s early life (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2021). Transitioning from stable, familiar environments and routines to new ones that are unknown, uncertain, and unpredictable “can present greater risks and a sense of insecurity and uncertainty” (Pavlova et al., 2017, p. 1); adult educators can provide support for neurodivergent learners through strategies that smooth the transition process (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2021).

### **Historical Views of Disability**

Disability has been viewed from different perspectives over time, and an understanding of the various models of disability can inform teaching and learning practices that can best assist adult learners in effectively transitioning to and from higher education. The moral model views disability as an individual affliction resulting from failure or sin (Goodley, 2017). This lens offers a justification for inequitable treatment (Baynton, 2013). The medical model sees disability as a bodily defect that needs to be remedied to move the individual as close to the societal norm as possible. Knowledgeable professionals guide treatment as this view supports ableist beliefs that those with disabilities are inferior and less capable (Goodley, 2017). The application of the medical model has precluded learners with disabilities from participating in higher education, particularly through the limitations of restricted accommodations.

The social model supports a minority and civil rights framework. It makes “a conceptual distinction between ‘impairment’ as a functional limitation and ‘disability’ as a socially generated system of discrimination” (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 50). The attention shifts away from the individual to society, creating inclusion barriers. It is a model that more closely aligns with the social justice tenets of adult education and demands adult learners with disabilities not face discrimination in higher education and the workplace based on their disabilities. Finally, the relational model considers both the impairment and the societal context as they interact. It builds a community of people who share the “burden to deal with difference in ways that allow members to share the rights and responsibilities” (Valente, 2016, p. 28) of learning and working together. Communication between disabled and non-disabled adults is paramount as they develop inclusive and mutually beneficial relationships.

### **A Critical Disability Theory Perspective**

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting and understanding neurodivergent students’ academic experiences and transition into college and the workplace. However, the approach to teaching and learning that adult educators adopt affects the students’ success. Examining the socially constructed nature of disability is crucial as a concentration on social norms that stigmatize neurodivergent students and a hyperfocus on impairments rather than strengths is detrimental to neurodivergent students (Hall, 2019). Viewing neurodivergent students through the lens of Critical Disability Theory (CDT) assists adult educators in understanding that the “social disadvantage experienced by disabled people is caused by the physical, institutional and

attitudinal (together, the ‘social’) environment which fails to meet the needs of people who do not match the social expectation of ‘normalcy’ (Hosking, 2008, p. 7) and avoids the discriminatory perspectives of ableism (Hall, 2019).

Neurodivergent students can experience attitudinal bias and a lack of or limited disability awareness on their campus and in their workplaces. The consequences of this ableism can be minimized to create and maintain inclusive settings through educational and professional development initiatives, restructuring the decision-making processes, and protecting against recognized stigmatization by maintaining a social approach to adult education. The CDT approach presents “disability as a cultural, historical, relative, social, and political phenomenon” (Hall, 2019, para. 1). It supports neurodivergent students by providing equal access to education, services, and inclusive transitions (Hall, 2019).

### **Transition to College**

Transitioning to college for all students can be challenging; neurodivergent students can find this change especially anxiety-provoking. Neurodivergent students often need supplemental support like mentors, counseling services, social support groups, exam accommodations, and assistance in daily living (Anderson et al., 2017). Adjustment, defined as social, personal, emotional, and institutional acclimatization, can predict a successful transition (Lipka et al., 2020). Preparedness for the change in environment and increased independence can yield greater success and retention, leading to graduation. Identifying the skills necessary to navigate life on campus and training the student for knowledge in the areas targeted as deficient is important. Lipka et al. (2020) and Roux et al. (2015) suggested the number of neurodivergent students entering universities is notable, and the need to prepare these individuals to adjust is paramount. Neurodivergent students need support in the transition process, focusing on social engagement, life coaching, and accessing disability support services for accommodations. Sheward et al. (2022) identified the lack of accessibility that some college students experience when seeking out disability services. Little guidance is available for where to begin and what accommodations are available. The need for ongoing assistance is clear.

Lipka et al. (2020) discussed the ability to adjust to the new environment from a personal, social, and emotional perspective. Many neurodivergent students have the skills necessary to live independently; however, social skill deficits or personal emotional issues may inhibit the connection others seek when leaving home. Onyishi and Sefotho (2020) found that along with social, academic, and environmental supports, personal support systems are necessary; it is important to develop a natural support system on campus like that at the student’s home and school. White et al. (2018) claimed that parents of neurodivergent students reported struggles with social activities, self-advocacy, and managing personal needs without the guidance of parents or guardians. Self-advocacy is essential in having needs met and remaining safe. Students with strong self-advocacy skills are less likely to be taken advantage of in a novel location or situation. Grogan (2015) spoke of the need to educate professors and administrators on the needs of neurodivergent students. When an adult educator is prepared to provide the appropriate guidance, the student can request accommodations to enhance their educational experience. The educators can review their curriculum, processes, methods of communication, and connection to each student. Braxton et al. (2002) argued for Tinto’s Model of Institutional Departure and the need to assimilate and integrate in formal and informal college settings. Formal was defined as the academic areas and extracurriculars, while informal referred to the faculty and staff interactions and peer relationships. Tinto referenced the persistence needed to become a part of

each area on a college campus.

The graduation rate for neurodivergent ASD students averages 35% (Anderson et al., 2017). The unstructured environment can create isolation, loneliness, anxiety, and depression and trigger suicidal behavior among neurodivergent students, along with an increased rate of dropping out before degree completion (Jackson et al., 2017). The lack of support from friends and family and the distraction of campus sounds, crowds, smells, and other sensory factors have direct consequences. Jackson et al. (2017) explained that despite reporting being pleased with their close friends and relationships on campus, neurodivergent students struggled to integrate with the broader campus environment and felt isolated. Neurodivergent students face challenges navigating the transition to collegiate life and require support across environments. By educating adult educators, programs can be implemented to meet the specific needs of students with disabilities and the broader student population.

### **Transition into the Workplace After College**

The unemployment rate for neurodivergent adults, such as those diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is 85% (Palumbo, 2021). Research has shown that neurodivergent adults want to pursue a post-secondary degree and desire to work after graduation. Their challenges and experiences require structure for the student to succeed, support services to enable their success, and additional education and strategies for school administration and professors in working with this adult student population. Neurodivergent students are often an invisible populace on campus. When diversity, equity, and inclusion are discussed during hiring, neurodivergent adults are typically forgotten. More neurodivergent adults are attending college, yet studies have discovered that Autism, for example, is often an “invisible” disability on campuses. Professors are not trained in how to work with these students, which has a direct impact on the student’s classroom experience (Zeedyk et al., 2019; Hatfield et al., 2017; Oslund, 2013).

A student’s collegiate experience directly correlates to their workplace preparedness. For example, the STEM field offers many solid benefits, including a high salary, high job satisfaction, and a strong economic employment outlook (Green, 2014). Neurodivergent individuals are underrepresented in this field. Neurodivergent adults have the lowest employment rates, fewer hours worked, and lower weekly wages compared to people with other disabilities (Wong et al., 2020). There is a need for post-secondary schools to provide services to support neurodivergent adults to better transition to the workplace (Wong et al., 2020). Hatfield (2017) stated that a lack of transition planning is a common barrier to successful employment for adults diagnosed with Autism; for example, it is characterized by difficulties in socializing communication, as well as restricted interest and repetitive behaviors. Difficulties coping with change can cause anxiety. Transition can be very difficult, and there is a need for strong preparation and communication to reduce these anxiety-driven situations (Hatfield, 2017). Wong (2020) believed that school-based transition supports the following: planning, adaptive behavior training, and the level of parent-teacher alliance, that correlates with students’ school positive performance and transition outcomes. Adult educators in college departments such as Career Services and Disability Research Offices can implement transition strategies such as summer employment opportunities with career training skill courses, campus employment opportunities, off-campus internships, practice job interviews, job shadowing options, and connections to hiring programs that welcome neurodivergent individuals to assist neurodivergent students with the transition to the workplace.

## Conclusion

The overarching themes noted in the above studies related to transitioning to college included the need to prepare for the day-to-day rigor of a college campus, planning for homework and schedules, and the social aspect of college. The need to have more specific, intentional preparation in these areas was consistent. High school administrators and course designers could apply the feedback from students to address the areas of deficit in the current programs. When transitioning into the workplace, neurodivergent students need structured support in identifying meaningful career opportunities that match their skills, a place in the diversity, equity, and inclusion in hiring discussion, specific transition planning similar to transition programs for students entering post-secondary education, adaptive behavior training specific to the workplace, and increased employment opportunities throughout their years in college. By recognizing the needs of neurodivergent students and designing programming to meet them, adult educators can increase the chances for success for neurodivergent students throughout college and at the start of their careers.

## References

- Anderson, A., Stephenson, J., Carter, M. (2017). A systematic literature review of the experiences and supports of students with autism spectrum disorder in post-secondary education. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, 39*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2017.04.002>.
- Braxton, J. M., Milem, J. F., & Sullivan, A. (2002). The influence of active learning on the college student departure process. *The Journal of Higher Education, 71*(5), 569-590. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2000.11778853>.
- Goodley, D. (2017). Dis/entangling critical disability studies. *Culture–theory–disability, 81*. <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/31487/627653.pdf?sequence=1#page=82>
- Green, S. L. (2014). *STEM education strategies for teaching learners with special needs*. Nova Science Publishers.
- Grogan, G. (2015). Supporting students with Autism in higher education through teacher educator programs. *SRATE Journal, 24*(2), 8-12.
- Hall, M. C. (2019). Critical disability theory. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E. N. Zalta (ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/disability-critical/>.
- Hatfield, M., Falkmer, M., Falkmer, T., & Ciccarelli, M. (2017). “Leaps of Faith”: Parents’ and professionals’ viewpoints on preparing adolescents on the autism spectrum for leaving school. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, 17*(3), 187–197. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12377>
- Hosking, D. L. (2008). Critical disability theory: A paper presented at the 4th biennial disability studies conference at Lancaster University, UK, Sept. 2-4, 2008. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 72*(3), 467-478. [https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/events/disabilityconference\\_archive/2008/papers/hosking2008.pdf](https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/events/disabilityconference_archive/2008/papers/hosking2008.pdf)
- Jackson, S. L. J., Hart, L. & Volkmar, F. R. (2018). Preface: Special issue—college experiences for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 48*, 639–642. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3463-7>.
- Lipka, O., Sarid, M., Zorach, I. A., Bufman, A., Hagag, A. A., & Peretz, H. (2020). Adjustment to higher education: A comparison of students with and without disabilities. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*(923), 1-11. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00923/full>.
- Meekosha, H., & Shuttleworth, R. (2009). What’s so ‘critical’ about critical disability studies? *Australian Journal of Human Rights, 15*(1), 47-75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1323238X.2009.11910861>
- Morris, J. (1998, February). *Feminism, gender and disability* [paper presentation]. Seminar in Sydney, Australia. <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/morris-gender-and-disability.pdf>
- Onyishi, C. N., & Sefotho, M. M. (2020). Teachers’ perspectives on the use of differentiated instruction in inclusive classrooms: Implications for teacher education. *International Journal of Higher Education, 9*(6), 136-150. [https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=Sefotho+%26+Onyishi+\(2020\)&hl=en&as\\_sdt=0&as\\_vis=1&oi=scholart](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=Sefotho+%26+Onyishi+(2020)&hl=en&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholart).
- Oslund, C. (2013). *Succeeding as a student in the STEM fields with an invisible disability: A college handbook for science, technology, engineering, and math students with Autism, ADD, affective disorders, or learning difficulties and their families*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

- Palumbo, J. (2021). Why Autism Speaks is encouraging companies to hire those on the autistic spectrum. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jenniferpalumbo/2021/04/27/why-autism-speaks-is-encouraging-companies-to-hire-those-on-the-autistic-spectrum/?sh=463c68152a28>
- Pavlova, M., Lee, J. C. K., & Maclean, R. (2017). Complexities of school to work transitions. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 16(1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-017-9211-5>
- Praharso, N. F., Tear, M. J., & Cruwys, T. (2017). Stressful life transitions and wellbeing: A comparison of the stress buffering hypothesis and the social identity model of identity change. *Psychiatry Research*, 247, 265-275. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2016.11.039>
- Rogers-Shaw, C., Park, T. W., & Mohney, K. D. (2021, June 3-6). *Life transitions & disability: The role of adult education* [paper presentation]. Adult Education in Global Times: An International Research Conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, Virtual. [https://www.dropbox.com/sh/r3hpexkxxy9hi5i/AACCKOvF8GqLA0t\\_lydeJic6a/PDFpapers/Rogers-Shaw.pdf?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/r3hpexkxxy9hi5i/AACCKOvF8GqLA0t_lydeJic6a/PDFpapers/Rogers-Shaw.pdf?dl=0)
- Roux, A., Rast, J., Rava, J., Anderson, K., & Shattuck, P. (2015). *National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into young adulthood*. Life Course Outcomes Research Program, A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University. <https://drexel.edu/~media/Files/autismoutcomes/publications/National%20Autism%20Indicators%20Report%20-%20July%202015.ashx>
- Schlossberg, N. K. (2011). The challenge of change: The transition model and its applications. *Journal of employment counseling*, 48(4), 159. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1920.2011.tb01102.x>
- Sheward, K., Rogers-Shaw, C., & Park, T. W. (2022). *Creating connection by design: Supporting adult learners by building inclusive online academic communities* [paper presentation]. Adult Education Research Conference. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2022/papers/27>.
- Onyishi, C. N., & Sefotho, M. M. (2020). Teachers' perspectives on the use of differentiated instruction in inclusive classrooms: Implication for teacher education. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 9(6), 136-150. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1277890>
- Valente, J. M. (2014). "Your American Sign Language interpreters are hurting our education": Toward a relational understanding of inclusive classroom pedagogy. *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, 25(2), 20-36. <https://doi.org/10.5325/trajincschped.25.2.0020>
- White, S. W., Elias, R., Capriola-Hall, N. N., Smith, I. C., Conner, C. M., Asselin, S. B., Howlin, P., Getzel, E. E., & Mazefsky, C. A. (2017). Development of a college transition and support program for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47(10), 3072-3078. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3236-8>.
- Wong, J., Coster, W. J., Cohn, E. S., & Orsmond, G. I. (2021). Identifying school-based factors that predict employment outcomes for transition-age youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 51(1), 60-74. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04515-2>
- Zeedyk, S. M., Bolourian, Y., & Blacher, J. (2019). University life with ASD: Faculty knowledge and student needs. *Autism*, 23(3), 726-736. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318774148>