



Talking About College

Most high school students intend to go to college. Given the current conviction that education is an antidote to the financial dependence and social segregation of people with disabilities, many people who rely on AAC want to attend college, are taking college courses or feel inadequate because college didn't work out for them.

Going to college can describe many different experiences. It's important for the individual student to be clear about his or her reasons for going to college so expectations have a chance to match outcomes.

Reasons to enroll

There are many good reasons to go to college. Some people who use AAC take college courses to socialize. Whether taking a course in adaptive swimming or astrophysics, a person is likely to find expanded social opportunities with like-minded individuals in college.

Adaptive recreation, sports or exercise classes are another reason to attend college. This can be an inexpensive way for augmented communicators to keep their bodies in good shape. Other classes exercise the mind. Some-

times referred to as "life long learning" or "adult education," these classes keep the mind sharp.

Colleges teach classes in a wide variety of useful skills. Learning a skill that will make life better or more interesting is another reason

to attend college. Many colleges offer courses in job skills. These courses can be used to fill gaps in the skills of a person who is employed, develop skills necessary for advancement in employment or gain a set of skills that are needed for employment in a specific job.

More than a set of skills is required for some jobs. These jobs require a college degree or credential. A college degree proves that a student has successfully completed a series of classes that imparts a broad knowledge about a field of learning and can communicate that knowledge. Some employers think that a person with a college degree is likely to be able to make good decisions as an employee. Sometimes the goal in attending college is not the specific courses, but the polishing or growing-up that will occur as the student learns to handle new social and intellectual situations.

Some augmented communicators just enjoy thinking and the challenge of mastering new fields of study. Since most colleges are now accessible and faculty and staff have some training in non-discrimination, the educational

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Message from the editor

I write this in September. Although it's been quite warm in Berkeley, there's a definite change in the air. The afternoon sun rests lower in the sky giving my front yard a distinctive golden glow that says autumn's on its way.

There's another change in Berkeley. After a few months of hibernation, this city is again stirring with the sights and sounds of academic pursuits and athletic endeavors. The University of California students are BACK.

College years are an exciting time in anyone's life. This is doubly so for the augmented communicator.

Here's a student on the ACOLUG listserv expressing her disbelief at actually being away at college:

"Hey everybody I really did it. Right now I am sitting in my dorm room at Whitewater. I have mixed feelings. I am excited, happy and afraid all at the same time."

She ends her post with:

"Oh, before I forget, do any of you know how to set up a date book in the Pathfinder?"

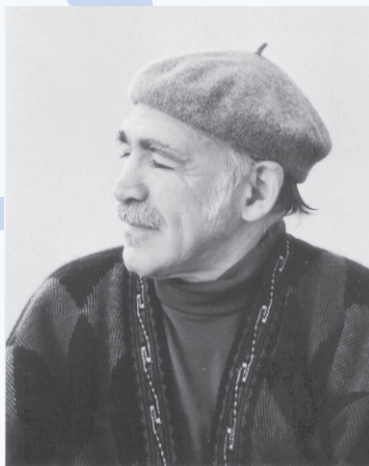
Is this a typical student or what?

The college experience has certainly changed for disabled

people since I was in a classroom of higher learning. I attended my local community college in the late 1950s. I lived at home, went to class, came home, did my assignments, ate dinner and went to bed. In the parlance of the time, "It was Dullsville, Man."

My junior and senior year at a private college had a similar quality. Although the institution had an excellent academic reputation, I chose the college because it was close to home and my mom could drive me back and forth to school.

That was then, this is now. As this newsletter will show, today's disabled college student has a wider range of experiences, both academic and social, than the students of just a few years ago. So wake up and pay attention, there may be a pop quiz at the end of the hour.



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community may be the most comfortable social and physical environment an augmented communicator ever experiences.

Planning ahead

Young augmented communicators have a serious responsibility in choosing their post-high school education. Saying, "I'm going to go to college," may lead to disappointment and wasted resources unless the individual has a clear idea of what will result from the experience and what it will actually cost.

The cost of college is not solely financial. Attending college diverts time and energy from other activities. Disability supports or age-related service windows may expire. Since a seriously unsatisfactory college experience can derail a person socially, emotionally and economically, the augmented communicator who is considering college must have some reassurances that the outcomes will be as expected.

Lynne Atanasoff, David McNaughton, Pamela Wolfe, and Janice Light did a small research study, which asked augmented communicators what it takes to succeed in a four-year college degree program.¹ Seven students from six different colleges ranging in age from 18 to 48 years old participated in the study. Four of the students were women; all of the participants had cerebral palsy.

A four-year degree program requires sophisticated communication abilities. The student is expected to be able to talk (and argue) skillfully about a subject. The student is expected to ask for clarification. The research project

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investigated three kinds of communication: 1. Face-to-face communication, 2. Written communication and 3. Distance communication.

Face to face

Face to face communication includes answering questions in class, asking questions in class, participating in small group discussions, leading small group discussions, making speeches and giving presentations. Additionally, the authors report “The current findings suggest that college students who use AAC should be prepared to initiate contact with college or university professors to communicate academic consideration and various accommodations.”¹ The issues augmented communicators experience in face-to-face communication are intelligibility and rate. “The participants reported using a wide variety of augmentative communication techniques for face-to-face communication, including dedicated communication devices (n = 5), natural speech and speech approximations (n = 3), and facial expressions (n = 3). One participant also used an interpreter (i.e., a familiar partner repeated the message produced by the AAC user to assist unfamiliar partners).”¹ Six of the seven participants felt they were “easily understood” or better in face-to-face communication.

Four of the students sometimes used pre-programmed vocabulary. Two students found repeat-

ing messages to be a helpful strategy. Two students relied on the screen text when the speech was not intelligible. One student also used what the authors call a “place-holding strategy”—the student would let the communication partner or instructor know that he would have something to say on the subject in a minute. Another student used an anxiety reducing strategy of initiating a greeting, asking a question or telling a joke when approaching communication partners.

Additionally, the researchers suggest that the augmented communicator will need to be the one to initiate conversations and that it is important to let instructors and other students know how to communicate with an augmented communicator. For instance, patience and concentration are appreciated and pretending to understand is not helpful.

College writing

Written communication is the second kind of communication competency a college student needs. Notetaking, test taking, report writing and essay writing are expected of college students in degree programs. The research participants had several techniques for dealing with notetaking. They all used a notetaker. Three of the participants asked instructors for copies of their notes or outlines. Additionally, some students tape recorded lectures, took select notes on their communication device or wrote notes by hand.

As college students are expected to do a lot of writing, rate becomes the major issue in written communication. Some of the

participants reported difficulty writing in a reasonable amount of time. The researchers found that “students’ self-rating of effectiveness was somewhat lower for class-related writing (e.g., short written assignments, reports, papers) than for face-to-face communication.”¹

Non-linear writing such as charts, tables and calculations can be a problem. The researchers suggested, “As completion of at least an introductory level math class is now a degree requirement at many colleges and universities, special attention to this problem, by both educators and device manufacturers, is needed.”¹

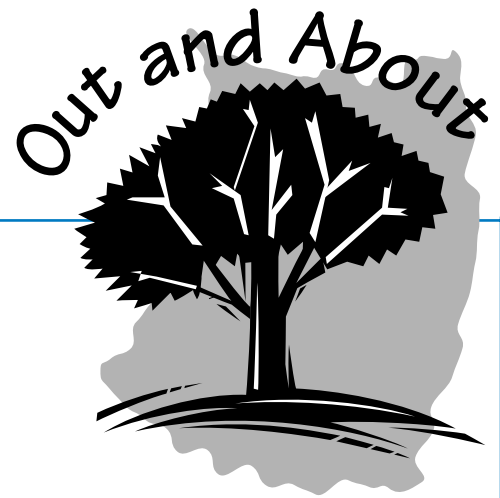
Distance communication

Distance communication includes telephone and email. According to the researchers, “For many of the individuals in this study, distance communication technologies, including the telephone and email, played important roles in supporting academic and social interactions.”¹ The participating students used the telephone for information about classes, social activities, registration information, and contacting family or friends. Five of the seven participants used email in college. (This research took place in 1995.) All five of the email users rated their email communications as “very easy” to understand. “Hence,” the researchers suggested, “it appears that the participants who used email considered this the most effective way of having their messages understood.”¹ Access to email as well as effective telephone techniques are critical for the augmented communicator in a college degree program.

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A Semester Abroad

by Fiona Given



This semester I will be studying political science at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada as an exchange student. I was inspired to undertake this challenge for a number of reasons. Firstly, in today's society it is becoming increasingly difficult to compete for the top positions in one's chosen field, and it is even more difficult if you have a disability, especially a speech impairment. In particular, augmentative communicators may have trouble demonstrating their attributes in an interview situation. Therefore, it is essential for us to be able to show that we have something a little extra to offer prospective employers. Secondly, many people in their early twenties spend some time living abroad as it is seen as an adventure. I also wanted to experience this adventure. I thought now was the best time to do it, as working or having an extended vacation abroad would present too many difficulties such as visas, personal care attendants and the like.

Studying abroad with a disability naturally presents itself with some major challenges. My mother accompanied me over to Calgary to assist with luggage and making sure everything was in place. However, she will be returning to Australia and will come over again to

collect me in December. I am living in an accessible apartment on campus and receive personal care assistance from an agency as well as attendants hired by myself through advertising at the Faculty of Social Work via the Internet. This is the most costly aspect as I was unable to use my funding from Australia. Augmentative communicators must be aware of the difficulties associated with new attendants. Many attendants may initially feel frustrated with the time it takes to communicate until they get familiar with the routine.

Obtaining a student visa proved to be a difficult process. I assumed that getting a student visa would not be a problem. I was not immigrating, and therefore my disability would not be a burden on the Canadian government. However, the Canadian government insisted I have a medical which was going to take six weeks to process and I was leaving in four weeks. I was panicking. Would my application be rejected?

Everything worked out in the end. My father forwarded my visa for me to collect whilst I was visiting the United States. If you are thinking about studying abroad, please remember to apply for your visa as soon as possible!

The University of Calgary has provided me with excellent

support. The Disability Resource Centre has been of great assistance in ensuring that the appropriate accommodations have been put in place such as notetakers and additional examination time.

Telephone communication is difficult for augmentative communicators in any situation, especially across the world! As you can imagine a thirty-minute phone call to Australia costs a fortune! Therefore, my parents have requested for me to mostly communicate with them via email. This way they can choose to ignore the message if it contains any whining! However, my father said I can call once a week.

I think this will be a very rewarding experience for me and will help me grow as a person. I encourage any of you who wish to study abroad to take the opportunity and do not let your disability prevent you from pursuing your dreams. **A**

Fiona wrote this article during her semester abroad. She has since returned home to Australia.

My College Experience

by Tracy Rackensperger

My name is Tracy Rackensperger. I have just very recently graduated from the University of Central Florida with a B.A. in Radio-Television. I use an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device as well as assistive technology.

Most people I knew from high school had distorted images of what college would be like—one big four-year party! College is not anything like what is portrayed in the media. It is hard work and takes dedication. However, the social aspects of college are also very important. Making friends and having fun while working hard is what it is all about. How does a person with multiple disabilities who uses AAC get the full benefit of the social aspects of college?

In my experience, people with disabilities have a lot of barriers to overcome to get the full college experience. This does not mean you should feel bad and not try to participate in all that you can, nor does it mean you cannot enjoy college as much as able-bodied people do. The following are barriers I had to overcome and what I did to have fun in college.

First, there is the telephone issue that I think everybody with

speech disabilities faces. Friends chat and people plan events over the phone, which makes it difficult for me. I am unable to use the TTY relay effectively and my state does not offer Speech to Speech service. However, email has been a tremendous help.

Second, I have transportation problems. I live about forty minutes from campus. My parents (especially Mom) take me to

university's chapter of Phi Sigma Pi coed fraternity. During the group discussions and meetings of these organizations, I used my AAC device to interact.

So how did this help me in overcoming these two barriers? Well, by joining formal organizations, I got a chance to communicate, make friends, and attend events. Since both of these organizations are large, members communicate via listservs instead of using telephone communication. I could be involved and talk to fellow members and friends via email. Also, both organizations usually plan social gatherings in advance thus giving me time to arrange transportation.

As in everything else, people with multiple disabilities must put forth more effort, creativity and planning to participate in social activities at college. Doing so will help make their college experience a blast. **A**



school. However, you know what friends are like—They plan things on the spur of the moment. People with multiple disabilities cannot do this because we have to arrange transportation in advance.

I'll explain in the following paragraphs how I overcame these two barriers.

I was selected to join a leadership program called LEAD Scholars my freshman year. Later, I became a founding brother of my

Tracy wrote this right after graduating from the University of Florida. In the interim, Tracy has accomplished much and the state of Florida has adopted Speech to Speech.

An Unexpected Education

by Diana U. Lara



At the end of spring semester, my old power wheelchair sounded like tin cans were dragging behind it. Also, the mount that held my ancient communication device was breaking down, and I had to hold onto my device to prevent it from falling off. My dreams and hopes started vanishing when my wheelchair and communication device began to work in a weird way.

I knew that my assistive technology would stop functioning eventually, but as the equipment began to fail, so did my self-confidence. I became afraid to attend my college classes because I wasn't sure I could return home safely. What would I do if my communication device or wheelchair totally stopped working? Within a month, my communication device just stopped talking. Its old, worn out battery had died.

Ten years ago, the California Children's service (CCS) funded my equipment because I reside in California even though I am a citizen of Mexico. I was 16 years old at the time. When I turned 21, I was no longer eligible for CCS and they stopped helping me. That's when I discovered that because I am not a U.S. citizen, I am not eligible for most of the services for people with disabilities in California.

In California, there is a network of regional centers that serve disabled citizens and non-citizens alike. For months I told the Regional Center about my equipment problems; however, no one listened. The slowness in providing services caused me many bitter moments and loneliness.

The fact is that my falling-apart wheelchair and my mute device forced me to drop out of my community college program. I became isolated from a social life I enjoyed because I had no way to communicate and go out. I stayed at home for about seven months because of that dead chair! The only way I can attend school or go into the community is with my equipment. I can't even go down to the corner without my electronic apparatuses. It was like my life stopped too, when my wheelchair and communication device died.

Refusing to give up

I constantly communicated with my service coordinator (SC) from the Regional Center in the hope that I could get some help. I called her, I wrote her letters, but the SC did not seem to get anything done. Each time I communicated with her, I got a headache! It was hard to make her understand that I needed help buying, or at least repairing, my communication device and wheelchair. Every time I talked to

her, it seemed like the first time because she acted as though she didn't know what I was talking about. However, I was not willing to give up and continued to express my great need for help. Perseverance and willpower were key to convincing the Regional Center SC, and eventually her supervisors, of my need. I wrote many letters, and I'll be honest, some of those letters were not very polite. I have patience but I also have a strong temper.

After many letters, conversations, phone calls, arguments and meetings, the Regional Center's representatives finally approved a \$22,000 budget for my new AAC device and power wheelchair. That day was very special for me!

Back in school

The day my budget was approved I felt, and I continue to feel, very good about myself because I fought on my own to obtain my new equipment. There were a few people who made some phone calls for me, but I wrote down what I wanted them to say. Now I have a brand new wheelchair and communication device, I am back in college working on an A.A. degree in marketing, and I feel good knowing that I can successfully fight for what I need.

A

Learning about AAC



The AAC-RERC provides many opportunities for people to learn about augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). Because the AAC-RERC has researchers at seven sites and is affiliated with six universities, the AAC-RERC partners are able to provide educational opportunities to people who use AAC as well as other AAC stakeholders. Here are some of the AAC-RERC's many educational activities.

Training professionals

The AAC-RERC partners support formal educational, clinical and research experiences for undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate rehabilitation profession students. Five partner sites have well-established educational and clinical research programs. These programs have substantially increased the professional training available in the field of AAC.

The AAC-RERC tries to interest engineering students in careers in AAC. In 1999, only one of the AAC-RERC partner sites had an affiliation with an engineering program. Today, five of the sites are affiliated with engineering programs.

Conference presentations

The AAC-RERC partners attend conferences to share information with augmented communicators, family members and AAC professionals. The partners present information at state, national and international conferences and workshops and participate in

those all-important informal "chats" at AAC conferences such as the Pittsburgh Employment Conference (PEC), the CSUN Technology conference and the Closing the Gap, RESNA, ASHA, USSAAC and ISAAC conferences. Conferences help keep everyone up-to-date in the field of AAC, including the AAC-RERC partners!

Articles

The AAC-RERC sponsors some of the content in *Alternatively Speaking* and in its sister publication *Augmentative Communication News*. The partners also are frequent contributors to other newsletters and professional journals. Sometimes information about AAC is presented in mainstream magazines, such as the August 2000 *Wired* article by John Hockenberry which included comments by yours truly. These articles educate people around the world about AAC.

ACOLUG

Most readers of this article, especially those who use AAC, are aware of the education provided by the ACOLUG listserv,³ however they may not realize that ACOLUG is partially funded by the AAC-RERC or that the AAC-RERC partners pay attention to what augmentative communicators and their families say on this listserv. While the partners mostly "lurk," now and again one of the AAC-RERC partners will post something on ACOLUG.

www.aac-rerc.com

The AAC-RERC website is accessible and rated at the W3C Level III. Anyone who wants to know more about AAC is welcome to browse this comprehensive site.

Kornreich webcasts

The AAC-RERC partners are featured lecturers in monthly AAC webcasts produced by the Kornreich AT Center.⁴ Anyone with Internet access can watch these lectures and present questions to the lecturers via email to be answered live during the webcast. Past AAC webcasts are archived and available.⁴ So far, both the live webcasts and the archives are free to everyone.

AAC-RERC conference

Once a funding cycle, the AAC-RERC hosts an AAC conference. The 2001 AAC-RERC State of the Science conference was attended by members of all AAC stakeholder groups. Many augmented communicators and their families participated in this event.

The AAC-RERC is engaged in many educational activities. By using traditional and virtual forums, and directing content toward the range of AAC stakeholder groups, the AAC-RERC conducts an ongoing continuing education program for all people who have a stake in AAC.



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Sources & Resources

1. Atanasoff, L. M., McNaughton, D., Wolfe, P., and Light, J. (1998). Communication demands of university settings for students using augmentative and alternative communication. *The Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 13 (3), 32-47.

2. Gray, Kenneth C. and Herr, Edwin L. (1996). *Other ways to win: creating alternatives for high school graduates*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

3. To join the ACOUG listserv, follow the directions at www.temple.edu/inst_disabilities/acolog

4. Information about future and archived webcasts is available on the Kornreich AT Center website. <http://167.206.140.10/webcasthome.asp>

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Thank you to all of the guest authors as well as to David McNaughton for directing us to useful resources.

Good luck in college, Stasia!

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Communicating well

Competency in these three forms of communication (face-to-face, written and distance) is useful for success in college degree programs. Interestingly enough, competency in these areas is important to anyone who wants to be a good communicator in or out of college.

Choosing a future

Augmented communicators in high school must develop specific communication skills as well as academic skills for their future. They also must make well-informed decisions about that future. Obtaining a four-year degree in hopes of a professional career is not the only way to make good money or the only way to contribute to the community. In *Other Ways to Win: Creating Alternatives for High School Graduates*,² Kenneth Gray and Edwin Derr point out that high school students' "aspirations and postsecondary plans are

inconsistent with both their high school academic record and labor market projections."² There are many good reasons to get a four-year degree, but it is not necessarily the only way or even the best way to get a good job.

According to Gray and Derr, "If the goal of students is future economic security, the focus of their postsecondary planning should be on obtaining job skills that prepare them to compete for a limited supply of high skill/high wage work."²

So it comes back to skills — learning how to do things. The student has the awesome responsibility to decide which skills will lead to a desired future and what role college will take in learning those skills.

In summary

There are many reasons to attend college—social opportunities, physical fitness, life long learning, skill development, employment

development, a degree, a credential or personal growth. The right college program can enhance the life of an adult augmented communicator of any age. Augmented communicators who know what they want from college and choose a college that can meet their needs are sure to benefit from the experience.

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