

Planning for College for Students with Disabilities: A guide for Teachers, Students and Parents.

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If you are a student with a learning disability, ADHD or Asperger Syndrome, you have to be prepared to take one or two steps in addition to all the other guidelines every student needs to know about. The reason, simply, is to ensure that you find the “right fit” in your college selection.

Self-Advocacy is TWO words:

You are already being taught some of the necessary advocacy strategies in your high school. Things like the differences between the laws like Section 504 and the Special Education law, IDEA. However, the first word in the phrase self-advocacy is “self”. To advocate successfully for yourself, you must take the time to really understand what your learning disability is, how it affects you in your classes, assignments, test taking, and in some cases, even your relationships with others.

The best way to do that is to take the initiative to meet with your case manager, or in the case of students on a 504 Plan, your school counselor can direct you with whom to speak. The people who did your most recent testing are also included. You want to ask them questions and have them tell what all those test results really mean in a practical sense for you and your future.

You want to know your strengths, your talents and gifts, your areas of weakness and, in particular the level of competition they think you can handle-not just based on their tests, but also based on the level of success you have had in your high school classes. You want to attend a college where you can succeed while also having the opportunity to participate in the social activities, sports or other activities that are part of the college experience. Getting into a school where you are overwhelmed by the challenges, and unprepared to cope with them will make for a less than pleasant college experience.

Support is different at college:

The day you graduate, the IEP you had in high school is no longer a mandated document and it no longer will dictate anything a college will have to do for you. The special education laws end with high school graduation. Even if you are under a 504 Plan in high school, you will find that law (Rehabilitation Act of 1973,) is applied differently in college. In high school, 504 Plans may be used to provide you many more things than will be provided in college. You need to meet with your school counselor and Child Study Team case manager to have that explained.

That doesn't mean you can't get assistance. Even if a college does not have a special support program for students with learning disabilities, they still must have an office on campus that will help you obtain "reasonable accommodations". Things like, extended time, computer use for testing, note taking assistance, etc. But YOU must apply for them. No one knows you are coming, no one knows you have a disability unless YOU tell them (not your parent). You must prepare yourself on how you are going to do that. And your high school can help you. Thousands have done it before you and you will be able to do it too. In high school, all your teachers, your guidance counselor, the Principal etc., had to be aware of your learning disability. The law is different at college. Your information is highly confidential. You must tell the office of disability services about your LD and bring in the documentation that shows it. Under the law, they cannot tell anyone about that information. You are in control of who will know.

You will find that many colleges will offer structured programs for students with different learning disabilities. One may accept students who have a specific learning disability, as in reading or mathematics, but not students with ADHD or Asperger Syndrome. Others may have programs for students on the Autism Spectrum, but those may not be appropriate for students with learning disabilities. That is because different colleges will set up programs that are aimed at specific disabilities; different learning issues may require different help.

When you are looking at colleges, or even some of the popular "guides" to colleges for students with learning disabilities, you must examine what they say they offer carefully. Just because a college may be in a "book" as offering a program, these programs are not all the same. Some allow you to "drop in" a certain number of times a week, others may set you up with a "coach" that you see once or twice a week to see "how it's going", and then others may offer you several standing appointment per week, a counseling session to "see how things are going", and some even offer a course in learning strategies for college success.

You want to understand two things:

1. Which type of program do you, and the people working with you in high school, think you need based upon your level of success, and level of support you needed in high school, and
2. Which of the colleges you are looking at, offers the level of support you need?
There are a few questions you can ask colleges on your visits listed at the end of this article.

Understand, that at most colleges, you will need to be accepted by the college before you can apply, or have your application reviewed by the support programs. A few colleges may still accept students through their disability programs, but that has changed significantly over the last several years. By definition, under Section 504, if a college is going to grant you accommodations, you have to:

1. Prove you have a disability, and
2. Show that you are “otherwise qualified”. That means that you met the same requirements to get in as other students; that you need accommodations to have an equal chance or opportunity for success.

Don't let all this technical “talk” overwhelm you. You are just starting on this journey and there are people in your high school to help you each step of the way, and who will explain in more detail what is being said here. Relax; this is the beginning, not the end.

Should you Self-Identify when you apply to college?

There are many valid arguments for and against the idea of disclosing a disability when you apply to college. However, it is not suggested that you send your confidential evaluations to the admissions office. They are highly confidential and say many things about you, your strengths and areas of difficulty, and only should be sent to the office at the college where people are trained to read and interpret those evaluations and are bound by the confidentiality rules of 504

and the ADA. That is typically referred to as The Office of Disability Services, or it can be another name close to that.

Having said that, many students will chose to disclose their learning disability through the college essay or in a personal interview for a variety of reasons. If you do make that choice, here is one word of advice.

DESPITE

The power of the word “despite”

Year after year, students will inform a college about a learning disability, or their ADHD, and the most common place they share this information is in the college essay. If that is what you chose to do, or are advised to do, it is vital that you communicate information about your disability from a perspective of strength. That’s where the power of the word despite comes in.

Often when a student decides to disclose a disability in the letter, the letter can come off as an attempt to provide an excuse or rationale for poor or weak performance, while in high school, or on indicators for success at college, like the SAT or ACT results. Not always, but often.

For example:

“I did poorly on the SATS because of my learning disability”.

Instead you should be disclosing your disability from a perspective of strength.

The power of the word *despite!*

- “Despite the fact that I was diagnosed with a reading disability in third grade and have had to struggle to get my work completed every school year, let me tell you about how successful I have been in my English and Social Studies classes ever since I started using digital textbooks in 10th grade. I know that by continuing to use

technology like this at your college I can be successful and make a contribution to your institution.”

- “Despite the fact that I have a math disability and have struggled every night I had math homework, I have been able to successfully complete three years of college prep math with the help of my parents and a tutor. It meant spending extra time to get homework done, and hours when tutoring had to come before basketball, however I did it and I am proud of this accomplishment.”
- “Despite the fact that I have Asperger Syndrome and often have had difficulty in social situations and with organization, I have been involved in the school’s robotics team for four years and was team leader the year we came in second at a regional competition. I have learned so much about interacting with people and managing my time, so I could fit Robotics into my school schedule.”

These are only three brief examples of how this approach of explaining your disability from a perspective of strength and accomplishment can enhance your status and your application.

Do you have to use the word despite in the essay? *Maybe not.* Can this same goal be accomplished with other language? Probably. But the essential ingredient is to portray yourself and your accomplishments proudly, and to explain to the admissions officer, that the disability is only a part of who you are: not WHO you are.

Remember, the law does not permit colleges to ask whether or not an applicant to the college has a disability. It may not take a disability into consideration when deciding on an application. And, you have no obligation to inform the college of a disability. If you disclose, it is your choice and it should be discussed with you counselor and case manager, if you have one.

What must be taken into account in the college search for students with disabilities?

Unless your disability is such that its characteristics require you to attend specific school, location, or need a special program or residential situation, the search should begin with all the same steps that are taken for any student planning to attend college. This is why it is so important for your college search to be conducted by a team of professionals who are both skilled in the college search, and who also understand your disability, and any special needs or challenges that the disability presents. That team will include your School Counselor, a transition counselor, and your Case Manager or Child Study Team.

Are there disabilities that are more pervasive and noticeable than others, and that that are more defining of person than others? Sure, but you need individual advice from your “team” to help you decide what to do in those cases, especially for an interview.

The school counselor, using his or her skills, knowledge and the tools available to him, will evaluates your GPA and grades and compare them to colleges that may be “safety”, or “reach” schools. He will also explore things such as:

- Whether you want to attend a larger or smaller school,
- If the student ratio of male to female is important to you,
- If you are an athlete, and if so, at the Division 1 or 3 level,
- If is important for you to attend a school that is religious based,
- If you have already identified an area of study he wants to pursue,
- If, if, if...

After you and your “team” have identified colleges that have the program you want, that you have a chance of getting into, are in the part of the country you want, have the level of sport you can play at, or have any of the other things that are important to you, it is now time to see what level of support services are available. They will have to fit your needs. If none of the ones selected in the first round have the support you need, talk to your counselor about expanding your search. Remember you should be looking for schools that you would want to attend if you didn’t have a learning disability, and at which you can be happy. It is worth taking the extra step.

There are guides published that list and describe colleges who report they have services and programs. Read the descriptions carefully and be prepared with questions for your college visits. Ask your counselor about them.

Some “Take Aways”

- Colleges may not inquire about whether or not you have a disability.
- You do not have to disclose a disability to the college admissions office.
- Special Education laws and even Section 504 plans that you had in high school, no longer require that anyone do anything after graduation from high school. You must request reasonable accommodations at every place you go after high school. And you need to have documentation to prove your disability. Remember, they don't know you yet!
- That self-discovery and learning about your strengths, gifts and learning disability comes BEFORE self-advocacy.
- That part of requesting accommodations will be a discussion with the staff at the Office of Disability Services about your learning disability, the accommodations you have had in the past, and if you found them to be effective.
- That not challenging yourself in rigorous courses, just to get better grades, is not helping you to learn about your strengths, to learn about doing the hard and challenging work expected in college, or about the need to keep trying again and again: in other words, “perseverance”.
- Formal disability support programs are not all equal, nor are postsecondary schools and universities REQUIRED to have a formal support program,
- However, all postsecondary institutions must have a procedure to address requests for “reasonable accommodations” under Section 504 and the Amendments Act of ADA 2008. A procedure for appeal must exist.
- Students should not disclose a disability in the admissions process except for very specific reasons, and those reasons should be discussed with appropriate school personnel, like your School Counselor.
- Requesting and receiving reasonable accommodations requires that you be “otherwise qualified”, and that you submit proper documentation of a disability. Formal support programs that go beyond the requirements of Section 504 and ADA may have their own admissions procedures and policies, including their criteria for admission to the program. Fees may exist for these additional programs, but not for accommodations.

Questions to take with you to a college visit:

When you plan to visit a college and have intentions of requesting accommodations or applying to a formal support program, it is really important that these questions be asked at those offices. The tour guide will often be a college student and may not really understand your question. And besides that, you will be on a tour with 20 other strangers, and may not want to be discussing your ADHD or Dyslexia in front of them. Someone needs to contact the college and request the name and contact information the person in charge of the program, or the special program the college has. Make an appointment to see them for a few minutes while you are there.

Please understand, they will not be able to tell you what accommodations YOU will get at the college, and they will not review your documentation until after you have applied, and at some colleges been accepted. They can tell you what kind of services they have in their programs, they can tell you the kinds of accommodations they have granted to other students-they just cannot talk about you until you become a student at that college or university.

1. What type of support program is provided for students with learning disabilities? (Or ADHD, Autism etc.)
2. Is there an application process to get into the formal program they offer?
3. What documentation do they require? How old can it be?
4. What kind of training do the people who provide the specialized tutoring and services have? Are they students or paid professional educators?
5. What fee, if any, does your program charge for services? Remember you cannot be charged for accommodations.
6. How often can I attend the program? How many hours per week?
7. Is there a summer program before freshman year begins? Is it required or optional? What does it cost?
8. What percentage of students with disabilities has graduated in 5 years in each of the past two years?
9. What are some of the accommodations that you would typically endorse for your students? (And then ask about one you know you would need if the person did not mention it.)

Remember this. Preparing for college is not the stuff you will be doing junior or senior year when you visit schools, and work with your counselor to pick some school. Preparation for college started the first day of high school: with the program you take, the level of challenge your courses have offered, the ability you have to know when you needed help, and the maturity you are showing every time you ask for that help.

Preparing for college is not about “how do I get in?”

- Preparing for college is about “how do I stay in” and succeed.
- Preparing for college is about the four years of developing the skills, habits and attitudes that will help you be successful in the school you do get into.

Good luck. Thousands of students with learning disabilities have gone before you and succeeded, and if you follow the guidelines in this article, you will too.

Some useful and popular references you can find easily.

1. Petersen’s Guide to Colleges for Student with Learning Disabilities or ADHD.

<https://www.amazon.com/Colleges-Students-Learning-Disabilities-AD/dp/0768925061>

2. The K and W guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Differences:

https://www.amazon.com/Guide-Colleges-Students-Learning-Differences/dp/1101920386/ref=pd_lpo_sbs_14_img_0?encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=0B2W77F4RDEX3EF0K48V&dpID=61jnBG8zq3L&preST=_SX218_BO1,204,203,200_QL40_&dpSrc=detail

3. The College Bound Organizer.

https://www.amazon.com/dp/1633536831/ref=sspa_dk_detail_1?psc=1&pd_rd_i=1633536831&pd_rd_wg=2pwel&pd_rd_r=BVH9Y4H43C9YDJ8Q99VZ&pd_rd_w=Kf5Kj

4. The Accuplacer Study Guide 2017-2018: Test Prep Book and Practice Test.

https://www.amazon.com/dp/1635301254/ref=sspa_dk_detail_0?psc=1&pd_rd_i=1635301254&pd_rd_wg=pazEb&pd_rd_r=V6ZP98M0TATM56AFP15Q&pd_rd_w=vo9p

5. Transition to College: Transition to College and Career : Experienced-Based Strategies to Improve Readiness of Students With Disabilities, Vincent J Varrassi, LRP Publications 2015.

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Do you know your
official diagnosis?

ADHD - Inattentive 2E
w/ anxiety

This
means
Twice
exceptional.
It means
you're super
smart + Punk