



# What Parents and Students With Disabilities Should Know About College

BY ELIZABETH C. HAMBLET

Most of today's parents grew up in an age where only visible or intellectual disabilities were the ones of which people were aware. Students with more moderate disabilities like learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were often either undiagnosed or may have been placed in settings where their full academic potential was not realized. Parents raising children with such disabilities may wonder what their child's postsecondary options are. Unfortunately, because high school special education teachers, case managers, child study team members, and counselors rarely receive any training on services available to students at college, students with disabilities may be directed only to vocational postsecondary programs because no one working with them knows that there are legal protections available to them at college, and that colleges do not put up barriers to their admission. These students and parents should know that college could be a very appropriate choice for students who have the requisite skills.

## COLLEGE IS A GREAT OPTION

Just as is true for typical students, attendance at a traditional, 4-year college is an appropriate next step for student with disabilities who are ready to handle the academic challenges there and to manage themselves without the structures and supports of high school and their home environment. If students have been keeping up with work at high school using accommodations that are very basic and allow them to work independently (such as extended time to take tests or permission to record classes) and they organize their time and materials at home, they should be ready to transition successfully to college. For the most part, the proper preparation for college is the same for students with and without disabilities. They should take the most challenging classes they can handle, be responsible for meeting teachers' expectations for academic work, and should have strategies to successfully read, write, and study independently.

There are no special barriers to keep students with disabilities from enrolling at college (though certain vocational or other kinds of programs may have specific technical requirements that all applicants must meet). On the contrary, students with disabilities have to meet the same entrance requirements as their typical peers—they do not have to meet any additional entrance requirements. Because this is true, they also have to have the same required classes, grade point average, standardized test scores, and other requirements as their nondisabled classmates, so parents are advised to keep this in mind as they help students choose courses in high school, and they should be very cautious about asking for waivers of basic requirements (such as math classes).

## ACCOMMODATIONS AVAILABLE EVERYWHERE

By law, all colleges in the country (except for just a handful of schools that both refuse federal funds in the form of student aid and are private) have to provide certain basic accommodations for students with disabilities. Schools are not exempt from this requirement if they are competitive, so Ivy League and other, similar colleges also have to provide services. Therefore, students do not have to narrow the scope of their search if they have the necessary requirements to get into challenging schools. They can go anywhere knowing that their college will have to provide certain basic accommodations, and that there is no fee to receive accommodations.

What parents and students also need to know is that because colleges are covered by different laws (Americans with Disabilities Act rather than the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) or sections of the law (Subsection E vs. D of Section 504), things may be similar but not exactly the same with regard to accommodations. Colleges do not have to make accommodations that fundamentally alter their requirements (such as waiving or making substitutions for required courses) or provide services that can be considered personal services (such as one-on-one tutoring). But on the positive side, they may offer accommodations students have not received before, such as access to books in alternative format and use of text-to-speech software.

One important point for families to know is that students' high school accommodation plans, whether they are IEPs or 504 plans, are not valid once they graduate from high school. While students may receive the same accommodations in college that they had in high school (this is much more likely to happen if they are receiving only basic accommodations), they are not guaranteed the same adjustments.

Certain basic accommodations are widely available, such as extended time for tests, testing in a room with fewer distractions, use of a calculator or spellchecker on exams where these skills are not being assessed as part of the test, and use of assistive technology for note taking (such as Smart pens). Accommodations are assigned on a case-by-case basis rather than by category (that is, not all students with ADHD will receive the same accommodations). Specific accommodations may not be available, such as regular meetings with a learning disabilities specialist or someone to create study guides for students (these are considered personal services) or a reduction in the number or length of assignments (this is a fundamental alteration). This is why it is important to make sure that students can function as independently as possible before they leave for college.

While the laws in place at college require all schools to provide some basic accommodations, some schools go beyond the minimum. They may offer extras such as workshops to help students develop essential study skills or to cover other helpful strategies, such as relaxation techniques. They may have learning specialists with whom students can meet once a week in a one-on-one setting. They may provide more targeted academic advising than students' regular academic advisor can offer. Families should remember that these services are above what the law requires, so while some schools provide these for free, others incorporate them under a special fee-for-service program. If students want to compare the services available at their target schools, they can start with each school's disability services (DS) website to see what information they can find. If they want further information about available services and extras, they can call the office or visit DS while they are on campus tours.

## APPLYING FOR ACCOMMODATIONS

Colleges are not allowed to ask applying students whether they have disabilities, and even when students talk about their disability in their application, that information is very unlikely to get to the DS office. Instead, students have to apply for services. This is usually a very simple procedure that often involves completing a form and may also include meeting with a member of DS staff. If they want to, students can complete part of the application process before they get to school (as soon as they are accepted and enroll) so that they stand a better chance of having their accommodations in place once classes start. Every college's website should offer information on the application process; if students can't find this, they should call the office to ask. In addition to completing any forms and attending any meetings, students will also have to provide proof that they have a disability (called "documentation").

There are a few things families should know about the DS application process. First, most students will be found eligible for accommodations at their college, but they are not guaranteed accommodations just because they received them in high school. Colleges have the right to decide what documentation students have to provide and get to decide who is and is not eligible for adjustments. Students' documentation may be found to be unacceptable for various reasons (it is considered too old, it does not contain tests that the college requires, it does not show a need for services). Parents and students who are interested in beginning to look at documentation requirements can go to the website of a few colleges in which the student is interested and check their websites to see what kind of paperwork they require.

Once students are approved for accommodations, they will have some additional responsibilities. Typically, they will have to provide their DS coordinator with a list of their professors. At many schools, the coordinator or someone in the DS office will then print for students copies of their Letter of Accommodation, which students will have to deliver to their professors to alert them that they are approved for adjustments (some schools do this by e-mail). Students will also have to do things such as alert their coordinator a few weeks ahead of any upcoming tests so that DS can arrange for them to take their tests with their accommodations (at some schools, professors and students work this out together).

At college, students have responsibilities for all of these parts of the process. If they do not apply for accommodations or only complete part of the process, they will not receive accommodations. If they get approved but fail to deliver their letters or let DS know about upcoming exams, they are unlikely to be accommodated. It is not DS's job to chase students who do not complete their processes; students are expected to take care of their parts of these procedures, just as they are expected to complete procedures for other aspects of college life, such as housing and financial aid applications.

The research on college students with disabilities shows that some decide to wait until their second semester at college because they want to "see how it goes" without accommodations or feel guilty that they are gaining some kind of advantage by using them. Students can wait until any point in their college career to apply for accommodations. They just have to do so with the knowledge that any grade they earn before they apply for services will remain on their transcript, so they should make sure that they make this decision with this understanding.

Parents, fearing that their student will not make a good choice about when to apply for accommodations, may contact DS hoping to complete the application for their students. At most schools, DS cannot even talk to parents without a release from students, so they cannot engage in this process with them. And most offices will not do this, because if students have not shown an interest in accommodations by making an application on their own, DS will not go through the review and approval process as it would be a waste of their time if students never come in to receive their accommodations.

## **PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE**

Again, preparation for college for students with disabilities and without is essentially the same. All students need study skills so that they can independently manage long-term projects, keep up with intensive reading loads, write research papers, and take effective notes in a very different academic environment. Many students find college challenging—lectures are longer, classes meet less frequently, professors are only available at limited times, and they have to keep up with work without daily deadlines to meet. And often, they are evaluated only on the basis of two papers or exams. This is a new experience for disabled and nondisabled students alike.

Students with disabilities need to understand their learning profile (strengths and weaknesses) and have strategies they can use to meet college demands. In high school, they should try to utilize only the kinds of accommodations they might receive in college (while special education teachers teach them helpful strategies) so that they have a realistic sense of the amount and kind of work they can handle. Parents who want their students to have the best preparation for college should avoid asking for accommodations that make changes to students' assignments (e.g., doing a project instead of writing a paper or reading an abridged version of a text) so that students have the confidence to know that they will be able to meet expectations at college. And they should gradually wean students off of more intensive supports at home, encouraging them to manage their own schedules and not always rescuing them when they miss deadlines or forget needed materials for school at home. Students need self-knowledge in order to understand what kinds of weaknesses they will have to account for in the unstructured world of college.

Students and their parents should ask high school special education staff to teach students the strategies they need (this should happen throughout their high school years). They should make sure that students' case managers review their learning profile with them every year and discuss with them the accommodations they receive and what they are meant to accommodate. If students do not feel that their accommodations are useful, they should tell their case manager and ask about other possible accommodations. The more students are engaged in their education, the better prepared they will be to handle themselves at college.

## **CONCLUSION**

College is a very appropriate option for students with disabilities who have demonstrated their ability to work independently in high school. For those who feel concerns about the academic demands or the lack of structure at traditional 4-year schools, starting at a community college can be a great way to get accustomed to the environment without getting overwhelmed. For those who want to go to the 4-year setting but are feeling unsure about their management abilities, starting school with a reduced course load can be a great way to adjust to the environment at a pace that is

more comfortable. There are many great options available, so students should not lower their postsecondary expectations.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### PRINT

- Hamblet, E. C. (2011). *7 Steps for Success: High School to College Transition Strategies for Students With Disabilities*. Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.
- Kravets, M., & Wax, I. (2011). *The K&W Guide to College Programs & Services for Students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Peterson's (2007). *Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities or AD/HD*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Peterson's.

### ONLINE

- Going to College: A Website for Students With Disabilities (<http://www.going-to-college.org/index.html>)
- Heath Resource Center at the National Youth Transitions Center (<http://www.heath.gwu.edu>)
- Letter to Parents From the U.S. Department of Education  
(<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/parent-20070316.html>)
- Students With Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities*.  
(Pamphlet available from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html>)

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