

# Planning for College Success for Students with Learning Disabilities



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A student with a learning disability planning to attend college needs to take several steps to prepare for selecting the right college and for a successful college experience.

## Preparing for College Success

The student must take a rigorous college preparatory program while in high school. It should be a program that is the most challenging in which he or she can experience success. It should be a program in mainstream classes at the 'College Preparatory' level and in regular education to the extent possible. The time to get a sense of your strengths and weaknesses and the level of competition you can handle is now, in high school, not when you are 500 miles from home, without a support network, and attending a college.

Your successes and your challenges in high school will also help you in deciding the type of support you may need at college. Remember, there are no IEPs in college. Different legislation, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, will now provide you with access but this is very different from what you may be used to high school. You need to learn about this difference. Degree programs and course requirements will not be modified to fit you; you need to find the program into which you will fit. The only way to know that is to know more about you and attempting a challenging curriculum in high school is one way to do that.

Another way to know what you will need in college is to really understand what your learning disability is and how it impacts on your academic studies. One way to do that is to actively participate in your IEP meetings and in the Child Study Team evaluation process. It is all about you, and now is the time to understand all that is being said and discussed about you: your learning strengths, your talents and your areas of weakness.

Think about it. You spend hours and hours going through all the evaluations conducted by psychologists, learning disabilities specialists, etc. and too often, you do not really understand the results of all those evaluations. Meet with your case manager or guidance counselor. Make sure your evaluations are current. Ask that all those reports be explained to you. Understand why you were given certain accommodations in high school and ask what accommodations you are likely to need in college. All of this information will help you and your parents decide what type of support you will need when you go to college; whether you can go to "Any college, USA" to which your grades and SAT's will admit you or whether you must consider going to a college that has a specialized program of support where you can get services like tutorial support or help with organization and advisement. Not every college has this type of program and even among the colleges that do have programs, the programs differ from college to college.

## Choosing the Right College

Once you are equipped with knowledge of the level of competition you can handle, facts about your learning disability and how it will affect you in college work, and the kind of support you are going to need, you can then begin to think about selecting the right college for you. There are many sources available in your guidance offices and in bookstores like Border's and Barnes and Noble which list colleges that have support programs.

But do not start there. Start by first answering the kinds of questions that all students should consider when looking for a college. After all, you are a student who happens to have a learning disability, but that is not all that there is about you. You have interests, you may be into sports, you may have a desire to commute or live away from home, you may be interested in an unusual major available at a limited number of colleges.

All of these things should go into your search as they would for any student. Once you go through all of this with your counselor and parents, your counselor can start to recommend schools for you to consider based on these criteria and your academic standing.

As that list is developed you can then look up those schools in books like the "K&W Guide" or the Peterson's "Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities and Attention Deficit Disorders." These books will have lists of colleges with programs from every state in the country. They will also have brief descriptions of those programs and what kind of support you can expect to receive there. Contact information for each program and school will be available, and now it is time for you to start calling and visiting those programs to see and hear first hand what they can and will do for you.

Remember Section 504 is very different from IDEA, the Special Education legislation. Part of knowing that difference is to know that colleges can determine the level of support they will put into their programs. Section 504 will enable you to receive the accommodations to which your testing and documentation entitle you, but that is not the same thing as an organized support program.

## Ask, Ask, Ask

### **Ask the director of the support program:**

How he or she selects students;

If SATs or ACTs are required;

How you apply to the program;

What kind of support you can expect to get, (ask them to be specific);

If their tutors are students or professional staff;

What accommodations are typically available to eligible students (not you!-They cannot tell you what you would get until you are a student and they have your material to review);

If there is an additional charge for the program;

If there is a required summer component;

If there is an optional summer component to help you get started.

Remember, you are the client. You have a right to ask these questions and it would be foolish not to ask them.

## Summing Up

Take a challenging high school program, one that's challenging but one in which you can succeed.

Become familiar with all of your evaluations, IEPs, 504 Plans. Know who you are, what works for you, and what you'll need.

Make sure your documentation is current. When requesting accommodations at college, you must have documentation (testing) that is recent, within the last few years. Different colleges can require different timelines. Find out yours.

Research colleges not just by whether they have a "program" or not but also by whether or not you would be going there if you didn't need a program. If it is not a place you would ever consider if you didn't need a support program, why would you want to go there?

Be ready to work! College is going to be a challenge. It gets harder, faster. Semesters are just barely longer than a marking period in high school. No third marking period to make up work. No fourth marking period to ask for extra credit. Take control of your time so it doesn't take control of you.

Relax. Thousands have gone before you and succeeded. You can too if you follow the steps outlined here.

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