

The Transition to College for Students with LD and AD/HD: The Educational Consultant's Role

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Educational consultants have a key role in supporting students with learning disabilities and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) as they transition to college. It is critical for college students with learning disabilities and AD/HD to be self-advocates. However, despite the growth in services for students with special needs at all levels of education, many secondary students with LD and AD/HD do not learn and practice self-advocacy skills until after high school graduation. Trying to learn and use self-advocacy skills while adjusting to post-secondary education is a formidable task, and many students are unable to successfully manage the dual agenda. Educational consultants who guide students to gradually relinquish parental and teacher support in high school, and assume that responsibility for themselves in college, provide a valuable service.

COLLEGE BOUND STUDENTS MUST UNDERSTAND DISABILITY

Students with learning disabilities and AD/HD often leave for college with only superficial understanding of their disability and how that disability affects most aspects of their lives. Some students even have a hard time saying the word “disability.” However, they will not receive services such as extended time on tests or a note taker if their documentation only refers to a learning ‘difference’ or ‘weakness.’ In addition to not understanding their diagnosis and how to explain it to others, these students lack skills in identifying the required help needed for them to be successful. For example, students who are successful know that they must attend class, use organizational skills, read for understanding, and study during the day. They must understand their strengths, weaknesses, and services they will need to assist them in college. As students become increasingly independent, parents need to step back and allow their sons and daughters to take over advocating for themselves.

This critical juncture affects the college application process and begins with obtaining accommodations for standardized testing, such as the ACTs or SATs. Students must apply for these accommodations. In high school the guidance counselor assists with the process, and the educational consultant ensures that this first procedure is on track. The educational consultant guides the student through the complexities of receiving accommodations on assessments, particularly when review and/or appeal of documentation occur. Then, once students enter college, they are considered adults and are expected to request academic accommodations for themselves.

DOCUMENTATION MUST BE CURRENT

Before entering college, the student's disability documentation should be current, usually no more than three years old. Consultants should review documentation requirements of each college on a student's list with the student and family because requirements can be different at different colleges. A good site explaining many aspects of the transition process is www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html. An example of documentation requirements from a college Web site is from the Ohio State University at www.ods.ohio-state.edu/prospective_lddocumentation.asp. All colleges have this information available, but it may be difficult for students to find without guidance.

USE ACCOMMODATIONS PRIOR TO COLLEGE

Often high school students believe that they should try out the college experience without utilizing any academic accommodations. Unfortunately, this logic can lead to failing grades and disappointment. Once a student has a college record, it will follow the student to other post-secondary experiences. Starting college using all of the recommended supports greatly increases the probability of success in that setting. In order to analyze what a student will need in college, the student should be encouraged to consider what information from past and current experiences can be applied to the next educational experience—college. A worksheet such as the one at the end of this article is helpful and can be completed by the student with a teacher, counselor, consultant, and/or parent.

FEDERAL LAWS AND LD

Differences in three federal laws govern services for students with learning disabilities and AD/HD. While in secondary school, students are covered by IDEA, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Students with disabilities are covered by IDEA until graduation from high school or until age 21. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 defines persons with disabilities who have a physical or mental impairment that limits one or more major life activities. The 504 Plans are developed with parents, teachers, and school personnel in elementary and high school and given to disability services staff in college so reasonable accommodations can be arranged. Each college uses its own process to provide services. The ADA, Americans with Disabilities Act, extends Section 504 coverage through adulthood and protects all persons with disabilities from discrimination based on disability in educational and other settings. Again, educational consultants can facilitate understanding of the laws and how they apply to their clients.

SELF-ADVOCACY IS CRUCIAL

Students with disabilities need to become their own self-advocates and speak up for themselves. If they receive special education services in high school or are covered by an IEP or Section 504 Plan, teachers and other professionals coordinate and direct academic support services. Parents may also assist with organization, ensuring that students are up-to-date with assignments, are on time for classes, appointments, and activities. In college, students need to organize themselves, seek out assistance themselves, register for services from disability support services themselves, and take charge of all needed accommodations.

Self-advocacy skills must be taught through explicit instruction. Students with LD and AD/HD often do not pick up subtle cues; even if they learn how to self-advocate, they often do not retain these skills and apply them in the next setting. Students must practice, refine, and integrate self-advocacy skills into their behavioral repertoire. Educational consultants play a valuable part in encouraging and assisting their students to become self-advocates.

In college, students are usually on their own making their own educational choices. However, if students do not understand their disability and have not practiced asking for recommended accommodations, they will have a hard time accessing needed services. No one will perform the task for them. If parents contact disability support services personnel at colleges and universities, those staff members often request that only students contact them, not the parents.

Students learn self-advocacy skills by participating in TEAM meetings, asking questions, and giving their own opinions. If students with LD and AD/HD opt out of transition planning meetings, they miss important opportunities to describe their learning styles, learning strengths, and learning challenges. This first step occurs with the support of school personnel and parents. Educational consultants play a valuable role in helping students practice these skills and encouraging student involvement in the transition planning process.

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENT

Another important area educational consultants can address is technology. When I started support services for students with learning disabilities at Clark University in 1983, the only ‘high tech’ options available to assist students were typing notes, recording classes on a small tape-recorder, and listening to books on tape from Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic (RFB&D). Even then, most students with learning disabilities and AD/HD did not use these, and many professors did not want students to tape record classes.

The world has changed, and technology has advanced in ways most of us had not even imagined. Students with learning disabilities, AD/HD, and other disabilities have a full array of technology available to assist them in college, including smart pens and voice recognition

software. However, many students have not used technology to help them in high school either because it is not available at their schools or because they haven’t become experts at using the available technology. Students must become proficient in technology use in high school because it is too difficult to learn new strategies while adjusting to college life and academics.

Educational consultants are able to play an important role in guiding students so they will receive academic accommodations in college. In addition to the low-tech accommodations such as using note cards or brief outlines as reminders when speaking, and encouraging students to tape record or take notes during school meetings, educational consultants are able to educate their high schools students with special needs on high-tech options. Students and parents are often not aware of the ways technology can make their lives easier.

Using self-advocacy skills as well as technology in high school provide excellent practice in protected settings and help students transition to advocating for themselves and using appropriate academic accommodations in college.

SELF-UNDERSTANDING

Self-understanding is the key to self-advocacy. Students who understand the reasons they do well in some activities and the reasons they struggle with others take the first step in working through challenging situations. Preferably students should come to this understanding before they are faced with exams or papers in their first college courses.

Teachers, parents and consultants should introduce study and organizational skills in the elementary grades, and these skills should be continually elaborated and expanded throughout high school. That way students with learning disabilities and AD/HD are ready for the independence they will face in college. Again, parents and educational consultants do not live with their adult children or college clients. While some students hire coaches to remind them of assignment due-dates in college, most students cope on their own.

Developing and practicing self-advocacy skills in the context of high school prepares the student for post-secondary experiences and beyond. As educational consultants, we have a key role in the transition process. We provide a valuable service by assisting our students and guiding them as they develop self-advocacy skills in high school and by helping parents transition to a different role in their adult children’s educational experience.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS:

1. Understand your learning disability and AD/HD. There are charts on sites such as www.LDonline.org which ask students to describe their learning strengths, learning weaknesses, and accommodations they will need to be successful.
2. Attend IEP or 504 Plan meetings as well as transition planning meetings.
3. Learn about your own learning style by asking your tutor, teachers, or educational consultant to help you figure this out. Explain your learning style and your learning disability or AD/HD and how it affects you to each of your teachers in order to arrange for appropriate academic support in each class.
4. Use a planner, calendar, PalmPilot, or computer program such as Microsoft Outlook to become better organized. Technology has contributed numerous organizational tools not available a generation ago. You must become familiar with tools that are useful to you and fit your personal learning style. You can begin using organizational supports in college, but it is preferable to 'hit the ground running' and not lose valuable time familiarizing yourself with organizational tools for the first time.
5. If you will need books on tape or digitally recorded textbooks on CDs (now the preferred format from Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic: www.rfbid.org), it is better to become familiar with digitally recorded books before college. You should consider whether the volume of college reading might require CDs even if you did not use RFB&D in high school.
6. Some useful tools to help deal with the increased volume of reading and writing in college include screen reading software such as Jaws 9.0 (www.freedomscientific.com) or Kurzweil 3000 (www.kurzweil/edu.com); scanning software such as Abby Fine Reader 9.0 (www.abbyyusa.com) and voice-activated software such as Dragon Naturally Speaking 9.0 (www.speechtechnology.com). You should learn these techniques before college so you are comfortable with them once you are attending college.
7. While you're still in high school, try using note takers, tape recording classes, using extended time on exams, and taking tests outside of the classroom in quieter places to determine if these are good accommodations rather than trying them out for the first time in college.
8. Make sure your disability documentation is up to date. Most colleges want documentation that has been completed within three years of college entrance. You should have these assessments done while still in high school rather than finding out that you may not qualify for recommended accommodations at a particular college.

9. You must understand the medicine you take, if any, and how you react to it. Knowing how the medication interacts with other medications, over the counter drugs, supplements, and alcohol is extremely important.

10. You should begin building support systems in high school so you know what works and what does not work. If tutors, coaches, friends, and study groups are useful in high school, these will be good to incorporate in college.

11. Consider attending a pre-college summer program for students with learning disabilities and AD/HD. One source for learning about such programs is George Washington University Heath Resource Center (www.heath.gwu.edu).

WORKSHEET

UNDERSTANDING HOW MY LEARNING DISABILITY OR AD/HD AFFECT ME:

- A specific description of my learning disability or AD/HD is:
- My academic and personal strengths are:
- My weaker areas are:
- In high school I have received the following academic accommodations and support:
- In college I think I will need assistance in the following areas:
- Classroom accommodations I would benefit from are:
- Additional information: