

Success in College for Adults with Learning Disabilities

HEATH Resource Center

Successful adult college students with learning disabilities, college advisors, and campus disability support services staff agree that developing knowledge about one's self -- the nature of one's learning disabilities as well as one's personal and academic strengths and weaknesses -- is vital for success in college.

Many people are not diagnosed as having a learning disability until they are in their 20s, 30s, or even later. By this time, their academic needs and goals have changed. They have multiple responsibilities related to their jobs and families. Their educational goals may be somewhat different from those of other students. Motivation for adult learners often is focused on career enhancement needs as well as on self-development and growth.

While the diagnosis of a learning disability in an adult brings about many changes in his or her life, it is important to keep in mind that such a diagnosis need not keep someone from pursuing higher education. With support and information, many adults are able to achieve their goals.

Increasing numbers of people with learning disabilities are enrolling in two-year and four-year colleges and universities. Since 1985, among first-time, full-time freshmen who reported having any disability, the percentage of those with learning disabilities doubled from 15 percent to 32 percent. Currently, nearly one-third of all freshmen with disabilities report having learning disabilities. Anyone with a learning disability who is considering going to college should be encouraged to pursue this goal without letting age become a barrier.

Self-Advocacy

In order to facilitate the college application process, adults with learning disabilities need to have an accurate idea of the strengths they bring to college. They also need to have an accurate idea of the academic requirements and admission procedures of the colleges or universities in which they are interested.

Professional documentation of the learning disability is the vehicle for understanding one's strengths and weaknesses. It is essential to have a full and frank discussion about that documentation with the psychologist or other expert who made the assessment.

Successful students with learning disabilities advise that the actual college application process should begin as early as possible. This will enable students to review the documentation of their learning disabilities and to work on understanding their strengths, weaknesses, learning styles, and any accommodative services that may be necessary.

Once in college, students are responsible for self-identification and self-advocacy. Effective self-advocates must learn to understand their particular type of learning disability, the resultant academic strengths and weaknesses, and their individual learning styles. Most

importantly, they need to become comfortable with describing to others both their disabilities and their academic needs.

Legislation Affecting Students with Disabilities

In order to be effective self-advocates, students need to be informed about legislation with which colleges and universities must comply that protects the rights of people with disabilities. It is important to know about the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (especially Section 504) and the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990**, and how these two pieces of legislation differ from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990. IDEA is the legislation that governs the provision of special education services to children and youth with disabilities in elementary and secondary schools. IDEA does not apply to higher education. Colleges and universities do not offer "special" education.

Section 504 and the ADA protect the civil rights of people with disabilities and require postsecondary institutions to provide accommodative services to students with disabilities. However, keep in mind that once students have been admitted to a college or university, it is their responsibility to self-identify and provide documentation of their disability. Otherwise, the college or university need not provide any accommodation.

Students with disabilities want to ensure that written records will be kept confidential and made available only to those with a legitimate interest in them. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974 protects the confidentiality of student medical records. Disability-related information should be kept by the college or university in separate files with access limited to appropriate personnel. Disability documentation should be held by a single source within the institution in order to protect the confidentiality of persons with disabilities by assuring such limited access. FERPA protects a student's record from being shared (without the student's permission) with "curious" faculty, administrators, other students, the press, or anyone without a legitimate reason for seeing the record.

Types of Institutions

Students with learning disabilities who are planning to go to college should familiarize themselves with the general categories of postsecondary education institutions. There are more than 3,000 colleges and universities in the United States. In addition to size, scope of programs offered, setting (urban, suburban, or rural, residential, or commuter), and cost of attendance, several factors are of special importance for students with learning disabilities.

Some colleges have open admissions and admit anyone over age 18 or with a high school diploma. These include both two- year and four-year institutions. Other colleges have selective admissions requirements. Applicants to a selective college must meet the criteria set by that particular college. Some standard, commercially available college guides list colleges by their degree of selectivity, or "how hard it is to get in" -- from "most difficult" to "minimally difficult."

Two-year colleges are most frequently public community colleges located in urban, suburban, and rural areas across the United States. Most are open admissions institutions and are non-residential. Some are independent (private) junior colleges that encourage students to earn an Associate Degree. Community colleges attract a variety of students; those who plan to take either a few selected courses in their interest area, those seeking vocational courses to train for specific jobs, and those pursuing an undergraduate certificate

(to study a specific field of training). Also, many students find it cost effective to obtain an Associate Degree at a local community college and then transfer to a four-year institution.

Four- year colleges and universities may have either open or selective admissions. Most require students to pursue a degree, and many are residential. Four-year colleges also are located in various settings, and in small communities they may be the center of cultural life. Tuition, room, board, and books are generally more expensive per year than they are at a community college.

Services and Programs for Students with Learning Disabilities

Services required by Section 504 and ADA are provided at no cost to the student. The college or university has the flexibility to select the specific accommodation or service it provides, as long as it is effective. Some examples of these could include:

- ▶Allowing extra time to complete exams,
- ▶Permitting exams to be individually proctored, read orally, dictated, or typed; and
- ▶Providing modifications, substitutions, or waivers of courses, major fields of study, or degree requirements on a case-by-case basis. (Keep in mind that such accommodations need not be made if the institution can demonstrate that the changes requested would substantially alter essential elements of the course or program.)

In addition to such services, hundreds of colleges and universities have comprehensive on-campus programs specially designed for students with learning disabilities to enable them to pursue the regular college program. Staffed by individuals trained in the area of learning disabilities, these programs offer services -- in addition to the standard services offered by the campus as a whole services -- that go above and beyond making a program accessible. As the services provided in comprehensive programs go above and beyond those that the college or university is required to provide under Section 504 and ADA, some colleges and universities charge an additional fee for these services.

Students who wish to learn more about comprehensive programs should either call each of the colleges and universities in which they are interested and ask if such a program exists on campus, or check one of the many guidebooks found in public libraries and bookstores that contain listings and information.

Colleges and universities will have either an individual or an office on campus whose purpose is to coordinate support services and accommodations for students with disabilities. It is a good idea to establish communications with these service providers as early as possible in order to make arrangements for any accommodations or services you may require. Ask your admissions counselor where this office is located on campus.

Documentation and Accommodative Services

Documentation of a learning disability is a written diagnosis that a learning disability exists, and is provided by a qualified professional such as a school psychologist, neurologist, or educational diagnostician. Recommendations for accommodative services and programs are usually part of the written document. This document can serve as a vehicle for the student to understand his or her strengths and weaknesses and is required to obtain the accommodative services necessary to participate in regular college programs.

Accommodative services are essential to the success of many students with learning disabilities. Accommodations that have proven successful may include:

- ▶Listening to a tape recording of written material while reading it,
- ▶Allowing extended time to complete exams (usually time and a half),
- ▶Using a computer to write out exams or papers,
- ▶Providing a quiet place to take exams without distraction of other students or intrusive noises.

Choosing a College

Visit campuses, preferably while classes are in session, so that you can get an impression of campus daily life, or talk by telephone with the staff of the Disability Support Services Office or the learning disabilities program.

During the application process, the student will need to decide whether or not to "disclose" the fact that he or she has a disability. The college or university may not require the student to disclose a disability on the admission application. Should a student decide to disclose his or her disability, this information in and of itself cannot be used as a basis for denying admission. Colleges and universities cannot discriminate on the basis of disability. On the other hand, colleges and universities also are under no obligation to alter their admissions requirements or standards. Students with disabilities, like all other prospective applicants, must meet the admissions criteria established by the college or university.

Colleges and universities are not required to alter admissions requirements, nor are they required to alter programmatic requirements for students with learning disabilities once they have been admitted. If a course in question is found to be an essential element to the student's course of study or degree sought, it is unlikely that a waiver or a substitution will be granted. Accommodative services, including the provision of course waivers and substitutions, will not be used in any way that would lower the academic standards established by a college or university.

Tips for Successful Preparation

The following tips may help adults with learning disabilities as they prepare for college:

- ▶Consider internships, part-time jobs, or volunteer community service that will develop necessary skills.
- ▶Consider enrolling in a summer pre-college program specifically designed for students with learning disabilities.
- ▶Contact the local Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency and investigate eligibility requirements. VR agencies may offer a variety of services to eligible students with learning disabilities, including vocational assessment, tuition assistance, or testing services.
- ▶Explore sources of financial aid. Most students need financial assistance to pay the costs of attending college. While there is very little scholarship money specifically for students with learning disabilities, readers are encouraged to review the **HEATH** resource paper, **Financial Aid for Students with Disabilities**.
- ▶Join one of the national organizations that provide support not only to adults with learning

disabilities, but also to professionals. Participation in the activities of such organizations is an excellent way to build confidence, increase disability awareness and disability-related knowledge, and get information about special programs and resources.

▶Take courses that will help prepare you for college. If appropriate, take foreign language courses and computer training while still in high school.

▶Awareness of one's strengths, advocacy skills, and persistence are among the most important tools for building a future through education. Adults with learning disabilities can maximize their chances of success by getting appropriate support, continually assessing their growth, and planning carefully. Students will be admitted only to colleges and universities to which they actually apply. With support and planning, more than ever before, people who have learning disabilities are applying to, enrolling in, and graduating from America's colleges and universities!

HEATH Resource Center: <http://www.heath.gwu.edu/index.html>