

Taking The Next Step

College Programs and Students with Learning Disabilities

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Coping with learning disability (LD) throughout elementary, middle and high school sounds like plenty for any child to deal with regardless of the quantity or quality of services provided by the school system. Now consider older students with LD, students who may want to think about formal education beyond high school. LD is a general term that refers to significant difficulty in the acquisition or use of one area or a combination of speaking, listening, reading, spelling, writing and/or mathematical ability. LD is a neurobiological disorder in which a person's brain works differently than most other people and this difference may affect abilities such as organization and memory. There is no "cure" for LD and it occurs across the lifespan.

As recently as a decade ago the outlook for students with LD contemplating college opportunities was pretty discouraging. Many simply ended their formal education at the high school level, often limiting earning potential for a lifetime. Fortunately, a combination of factors, mostly relating to the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, has made prospects for students with such disabilities as LD or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) more promising, and most colleges provide at least some support services so that students with many kinds of disabilities can be successful. Services and programs, however, vary widely from college to college.

A Range of Programs and Supports

When a college has a comprehensive LD support program it may offer diagnostic and prescriptive planning, advisement, priority registration, counseling, remediation, tutoring, special courses, auxiliary aids and services, and more. The staff may include personnel with appropriate training and expertise in working with individuals who have LD. At colleges without formal programs there will be much less in the way of support. Some of the services that can be very helpful may not be specifically for students with LD, and you will want to keep in mind that colleges can charge for some services. Each college has its own unique combination of services and support and it's up to the student and family to do adequate research and investigation in choosing a good match to maximize the potential for success in college.

Realistic Choices

Every individual has the right to pursue higher education, but not every college has the same criteria for acceptance. Rather than focusing on his or her ability to be accepted to a particular college, a prospective college student with LD needs to consider whether he or she will be successful with the supports and services available at the institution. Students need to understand their own unique needs and be able to request accommodations and modifications that they know will help them be successful learners.



Community Colleges

The majority of students with disabilities who enroll in post-secondary education of any type go to community colleges. And community colleges offer a good option if they provide the supports and services necessary to meet the needs of the student. Most community colleges have open admission and will enroll almost anyone who wishes to further his or her education. They typically offer a wide variety of programs including vocational and occupational courses.

Many students with LD see scoring adequately on either the SAT or ACT tests, tests often required for admission to 4-year programs, as a potential stumbling block to enrolling in some colleges. There is no requirement to take either test for enrollment in a community college; however, community colleges may require placement tests and possibly remedial classes if indicated for a degree-granting program. Some colleges even help students with disabilities develop a plan outlining needed accommodations and other services such as tutoring or counseling. In addition, some community colleges also have learning centers where students with disabilities can utilize computers with special software.

Self-Identification

Unlike the Child Find programs in elementary and secondary level education, which try to identify students in need of special education or related services, colleges do not seek to identify students with disabilities, regardless of the services that might

be available to those who need them. When students graduating from high school have a "hidden" disability, such as LD, they may choose whether or not they wish to identify themselves. Those who do not make their disability known have little or no recourse if they run into academic difficulty later on as a result of the disability. But when they understand and acknowledge the disability, adequately investigate and research available college programs, and advocate for the supports and services needed, students with disabilities such as AD/HD or LD can be assured a greater chance for success and a feeling of real satisfaction as they pursue a college education.

Office of Disability Services

There should be an office of disability services at each postsecondary institution. Colleges use different names to refer to this office, but it is the point of contact for students who wish to identify themselves as having a disability (whether they are in need of services at the time or not). The office of disability services can also provide information about services for those who may qualify.

Most college Web sites now indicate how perspective students

should apply if they have a disability. IDEA doesn't require that either the school system or postsecondary educational system pay for a new evaluation. The student, however, must provide documentation in the form of recent (usually within the past one to three years) psychological/eligibility testing showing that he or she has a current disability in order to be considered for accommodations and modifications under the ADA and Section 504. It can also take a good deal of time to schedule, complete and receive the written results of such evaluations, so it is advisable to begin to secure the necessary assessments during the senior year of high school.

For more specific guidelines you can view and download the publication "Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities" at www.ed.gov/ocr/transition.html.

To contact the U.S. Department of Education Publications Center which has many valuable publications available on a wide variety of educational topics, call toll free 877-433-7827 or view the titles of all their publications on-line at www.ed.gov/about/ordering.jsp

Helpful Books

Peterson's Colleges with Programs for Students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorders.

Information on over 750 two-and four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada, 800-338-3282, www.petersons.com.

K&W Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorders.

In depth profiles of over 300 colleges (and information about an additional 1,000 other colleges) with programs for students with LD,

Random House, 800-733-3000, www.randomhouse.com.

Understanding Learning Disabilities: A Parent Guide and Workbook

Covers the topic of college for students with LD, and includes helpful workbook pages of "Questions to Ask Before Applying to a College."

The 3rd edition of this book can be previewed and ordered on the council's Web site at www.ldcouncil.com or ordered by calling 804-748-5012.

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