



How Learning Differences Impact the College Application Process

With support systems and accommodations in place, increasing numbers of students with learning differences are succeeding in high school and going on to college, but getting into the college of one's choice is no guarantee of success once there. Here are a few things students with learning differences and their parents should be aware of as they embark on the college search process and the students eventually transition into a college or university.

Whereas high schools are mandated to provide whatever is deemed necessary in order for a student to achieve success, colleges have no such mandate; they are merely supposed to “level the playing field.” However, when students come to campus with a documented learning difference and register with the Disabilities Office on campus, they will in all likelihood be granted some of the same accommodations they have been receiving all along.

In order to receive accommodations in college as well as on the SAT and ACT, students must present documentation which includes a neuropsychological evaluation that is less than three years old. Be sure to submit the documentation to the testing organizations several months before you plan to take your first ACT or SAT, especially since the process can entail multiple appeals. As increasing numbers of students are requesting accommodations from both the College Board and the ACT, these testing organizations have become stricter in their requirements for supporting documentation from the high school. They want to know that the student has been utilizing the same accommodations in school, and that these accommodations have been essential to his success there. The most commonly granted accommodation is extended time, and according to Dr. Denise Cascio of NYU's Child Study Team, the required neuropsychological testing will soon include a measure of malingering designed to weed out students who deliberately perform slowly when being evaluated.

All colleges will provide extended time on exams, sometimes in a distraction-free environment, and all are required to provide text books and other required readings in an alternative format, although the formats they use vary from school to school. Tutoring in various subjects and a Writing Center where students can obtain help with any written assignments are widely available, often free of charge. These

services are most commonly, but not always, provided by undergraduate or graduate students rather than faculty or staff. Private or group sessions to help students with organizational and study skills are also available at some colleges, often led by trained learning specialists.

What students with learning differences may be accustomed to having in high school but will not find in college unless they enroll in a special program is someone who oversees their performance and makes sure that they take advantage of the resources and accommodations they need. Especially since their parents will no longer be able to intervene, these students must be prepared to take responsibility themselves to seek out help. They should be able to articulate what exactly their learning issues are and be prepared to advocate for themselves with their professors to ensure they receive whatever accommodations the Disabilities Office grants them.

When putting together a college list, students with learning differences should have a frank discussion with their parents and counselors about what services they will require in college, and when they visit schools, they should arrange to meet with the director of the support services on campus to learn what will be available to them. Some schools offer quite a bit even though they don't have a "program," per se. For instance, the student might be able to set up regular meetings with a professional coach. The people running the support services at various schools differ widely in how willing they are to go the extra mile to meet individual needs, as a brief meeting with each should make readily apparent.

Many students who have received support throughout high school are eager to believe they've outgrown the need for it. While some probably have, that is a risky assumption, especially for those with Executive Function disorders (extremely common, especially in conjunction with ADD and ADHD). Executive function skills, which include planning, organization, time management, and response inhibition among others, are essential for college freshmen who find themselves for the first time in their lives free of parental supervision, in an exciting new environment where it is relatively easy to put off until tomorrow what they really ought to be doing today. Not only will they be faced with plenty of potential distractions, but their classes will meet infrequently compared with high school classes, and in all likelihood no one will be keeping track of their attendance or checking regularly that they are keeping up with their assignments. Furthermore, their entire course grade will likely be based on a small number of major tests or papers.

Executive function skills develop gradually in everyone as they mature from childhood into adulthood, but when there is a delay in the natural maturation, they may be taught, says Dr. Cascio, who cautions that teaching them requires time and that students must be weaned gradually off their reliance on others to keep them on track. Ideally students are taught strategies to help themselves, but many are not yet ready to be fully independent when they enter college, so they may derive great benefit from a coach. If the college they attend cannot provide a coach, they may

seek one elsewhere. The coach need not be that close geographically if he or she can work with the student by telephone and Internet. Another option is to contact AHEADD, an organization devoted to helping college students with various issues achieve academic success. Among the services AHEADD provides is assistance finding a coach within 15 miles of the school. See <http://www.aheadd.org>.