

Successful Transition to Adult Life: Preparing for and Navigating College

By Crystal Reed, MA, College Counselor for Students with Special Needs

While handing out diplomas at our local high school last week, I was struck by the contrast between the enthusiasm most of the students had for launching into the adult world and the ambivalence and trepidation I see in the college-bound kids with disabilities or special needs that I've been working with for the past 18 years.

Leaving the familiar safety of high school and entering the grown-up world of the workforce or higher education can be stressful, especially for those who have relied so heavily on the codified and wide-reaching net of special education. All students experience tremendous growth in the years following graduation, so we should not expect those who also have learning, emotional, attentional, or autism spectrum issues—which often cause lags in social/emotional development—to make absolute decisions while still in high school. That is often too early to commit to long-term educational plans.

The real goal of their transition planning should be to build skills and find the “right next step.” We want to enroll these students in programs where they can start establishing track records of success. Appropriate opportunities will develop naturally as a product of positive results.

Finding the Right Next Step

There are many elements to consider when evaluating the fit of any educational program after high school. Does the school teach a subject (major) of interest? Are the student's GPA and test scores a good match for the school profile? Can the family afford it? Does the school offer

the right types of support? Does it have the kinds of extracurricular activities that will keep the young person productively occupied and feeling connected? Even weather, dorms, and dining options warrant consideration.

These are all important questions. But most importantly we need to ask: Is the student actually ready to take on this particular challenge?



The student's level of self-awareness is of critical importance in this process. None of us can find the right path for ourselves if we aren't genuinely aware of what we want and need, of our own strengths and weaknesses. When considering education after high school, students with disabilities need to have moved beyond any denial of their disability so they can accept the need for support as part of their planning.

Self-acceptance doesn't happen overnight; it often takes a long-term, concerted effort by the family, school,

and service providers. But while it is sometimes frustrating and difficult, self-acceptance is absolutely essential if these young people are to lead happy, productive, reasonably independent adult lives.

Preparing

In addition to the obvious component of academic preparation (fulfilling college eligibility requirements, taking increasingly rigorous coursework, etc.), there are other keys to helping students prepare for the transition to college.

According to the Landmark College Institute for Research and Training, a leading organization for research on college students with learning differences, the most important skills students must possess in order to be successful in college are the following:

- Executive functioning skills
- Self-advocacy skills
- Strong independent work habits

In fact, their research showed that academic ability only minimally impacts a student's statistical chances of persevering in college. Granted, students with weaker academic skills may take longer to complete their program, but in terms of staying in college and progressing through a course of study, independence-related skills were infinitely more important.

Our job as parents and educators is to support all of our students in becoming the most capable and responsible young adults possible. We don't do this by clearing obstacles from a child's path but by teaching increasingly sophisticated methods and strategies for independently

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managing, overcoming, and tolerating those obstacles that will inevitably arise. This should be a primary focus across curricula and in the home in order to raise students who are ready to enter higher education or the workforce after high school.

My students confirm this from their experiences. Number one on their wish list of things that schools and parents should have done differently was to have placed more emphasis on helping them become independent; to learn to handle the challenges that they quickly came to face, largely unprepared, in the post-high-school world.

(Number two, if you're interested, was for adults to realize that college isn't for everybody and to be more supportive of students finding a productive alternative if that is their choice.)

In addition, we need to teach students the differences between high school and college. Many things we might consider obvious or trivial can throw first-year college students off kilter and interfere with their successful transition. When I talk about these things with high school students with disabilities (and even with some general education students), they frequently react with surprise to each and every item. Some examples:

- There is no curfew in a dorm and nobody makes you go to class.
- There will be no bells to signal the beginning or end of class.
- You generally don't go to each of your classes every day.
- You have to buy all of your own books and supplies.
- In most cases, no one will ask if you need help; you must seek out help yourself.
- Your parents cannot talk to your professors on your behalf.

- Your grade is often based only on tests, not on homework.

You get the idea. The list of small-but-important things you can teach them is almost endless.

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Help in College, Part 1

Students with a documented disability should sign up with the disability services office at their school of enrollment well before their first semester starts. (All colleges receiving federal funds are required to provide reasonable accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act—ADA—and Section 504, an amendment to the Workforce Rehabilitation Act.) Even if the student never needs classroom accommodations, there are usually other benefits of being a client, such as priority enrollment and decreased course load thresholds for financial aid.

Accommodations are administered differently in college than in high school, partly because after high school, typically when they turn 18, students have reached the “age of majority.” According to the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, “Age of majority is the legal age established under State law at which an individual is no longer a minor and, as a young adult, has the right and responsibility to make certain legal choices that adults make.”¹ Students hold their own confidentiality, which means that the disabilities counselor cannot speak even to the parents without the student's consent. School office staff will

only disclose details about the student's disability and approved accommodations to faculty or other support personnel at the student's request. Any file or record related to accommodations or disability is kept separate from a student's main admissions file, which also means that if students change schools they must apply again for services at their new college.

It is critical for students and parents to be aware of the great disparity between the support provided in K–12 under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and that offered in college under ADA. A shorthand way to understand the difference is that colleges are only required to ensure that students can access the curriculum, whereas most K–12 special education programs, in addition to ensuring access, are also designed to promote student success. Practically speaking, IDEA regulations require individualized education program (IEP) plans, establish timelines for student evaluations, specify who must participate, and outline the dispute resolution process, thus shaping state, district, and school rules. ADA is less prescriptive and does not dictate how processes and supports for students with disabilities must be implemented, so there is more variation from college to college.

Consequently, college students are almost never granted all of the accommodations, supports, and modifications to which they were entitled in their IEPs. Colleges are permitted by law to determine which “reasonable accommodations” each applicant receives, based on a review of the documentation. Extended time on tests, testing in a quiet location, preferential seating in class, and possibly a copy of a teacher's or classmate's notes are accommodations that are often granted. Anything beyond that—relating

to learning style, presentation of material, shortening the length of assignments, or extending deadlines, for example—is often not approved.

If a student or her family believes that she will need more extensive support than is likely to be offered by a typical disabilities office, she should explore the options detailed below. Fortunately, more programs are being developed all the time due to the rapid growth in the number of college-bound students with disabilities.

Help in College, Part 2

Most programs that offer additional services for learning and living support have a hefty price tag. But if the cost is manageable and the student, the family, and the rest of the support team determine that the student can handle the program (and a move away from home, when applicable), here are some options to consider:

Dorm alternatives. Instead of living in a residence hall, students live at a facility with on-site staff and a scheduled program that focuses on study skills and life skills support. College Living Experience² and College Internship Program³ are two examples of this model.

On-campus fee-for-service programs. SALT⁴ at the University of Arizona, MAAP⁵ and MAST⁶ at Marymount California University in Palos Verdes, and Transition UP at CalState University Northridge⁷ all provide fee-for-service programs that specialize in supporting students with specific types of learning differences or autism spectrum disorders. In these programs, a counselor typically meets frequently with the student to make sure the student is on track to meet his or her educational and personal goals.

Community college. Many families opt to have their new grads attend community college for a while in order to stretch their education dollars. This is also often the best

solution if there are serious concerns about a student's ability to simultaneously manage the huge leap in academic expectation while navigating the vast social/emotional changes a student faces at this stage of life. Another benefit is that it's easy to start out slowly at community college with a part-time class load, which helps reduce the risk of failure due to being overwhelmed.

Precollege year. Many people are familiar with the idea of a postgrad year, but Mitchell College in Connecticut offers a unique precollege-year program called Thames Academy.⁸ Students live on campus but with more supervision than the regular college population, and they take foundational classes to get ready for a traditional first year.

Rent-a-buddy. This isn't a formal program, but I have known several parents who have successfully supported their son or daughter through the transition to college by hiring a reliable local grad student as a designated mentor or buddy.

Free, on-campus peer-mentoring programs. A few colleges offer peer-mentoring programs for special needs students—and sometimes for all first-year students.

Regional Centers. If the student is a client of a Regional Center,⁹ that agency should be in charge of obtaining the appropriate independent living skills services (though not educational support services).

The most important thing to remember is that there will be a “right next step” for each student. My advice to students, parents, and teachers is to stay positive and hopeful and keep an open mind. Maintain the focus on finding a program that will challenge but not overwhelm. Success happens one step at a time. ◀

Crystal Reed has been counseling students with special needs since 1997. You can find her at www.NoDramaCollegeCounseling.com.

1. NCSET (2002). *Age of Majority: Preparing Your Child for Making Good Choices*. <http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=318>
2. **College Living Experience**. <http://experienceccle.com>
3. **College Internship Program**. <http://cipworldwide.org>
4. **SALT: Strategic Alternative Living Techniques**. <http://www.salt.arizona.edu>
5. **MAAP: Mariner Academy Assistance Program**. <http://www.marymountcalifornia.edu/maap-program>
6. **MAST: Mariner Academy Strategies and Techniques**. <http://www.marymountcalifornia.edu/mast-program>
7. **Transition UP**. <http://www.transitionup.net/#!welcome/mainPage>
8. **Thames Precollege Year**. <http://www.thamesacademy.org>
9. A directory of **California Regional Centers** is at <http://www.dds.ca.gov/RC/RCList.cfm>

▶ *Navigating the College Transition Maze: A Guide for Students With Learning Disabilities* is available at <http://www.hemophiliafed.org/uploads/navigatingcollegetransitionmaze.pdf>

▶ *Postsecondary Education Options for Students with Intellectual Disabilities* from the Institute for Community Inclusion is at https://www.communityinclusion.org/article.php?article_id=178