

Living with a Learning Disability: Tips on Preparing for College

By Rebecca Sheils

The summer will be here before you know it, and if you're a high school junior, this probably means the beginning of your college application process. Visiting schools, applying for scholarships, going on interviews, preparing a portfolio: it can all get a little overwhelming. If you are a student with a documented learning disability, chances are the process can seem that much more intimidating. However, there is no need to get discouraged. Knowing a few key tips can help make for a smoother application process and college transition.

- **Know before you go**

Consider your college visits a time to check out the services provided on campus for students with disabilities. Each college or university has its own system, but each is committed to equal access to education under the law. You can make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services (ODS) for the same day you visit a school.

- **Ask questions**

Remember to ask about what is provided by the school, including academic accommodations, tutoring, and course selection. During your visit, or via a phone call or email, ask what you can expect. Some examples of accommodations within the university setting are extended time on exams, distraction-free environments for exams, time extensions for written assignments, and alternative testing such as use of a scribe or reader. Accommodations are based on the documentation you provide but might not be completely the same as your current IEP or Service Plan. You should always feel free to ask questions of the ODS. They are there to help and support you, especially in your first year at school, but they can only do as much as you ask. Make sure you speak up if you need help!

- **What to disclose**

By law, two and four-year institutions cannot require students to disclose their disability and it cannot be a factor in the admissions process. While it is important to visit a school's Office of Disability Services to find out as much as you can, you do not have to discuss your specific disability with anyone associated with the school prior to admittance.

- **Become an advocate for yourself**

Unlike in high school, students who wish to receive academic accommodations at the college level need to self-disclose their disability and provide appropriate documentation to receive accommodations. This can seem daunting, but with a little practice it gets easier. The school you choose will need to see current and valid documentation of a disability in order to grant any academic accommodations, so make sure you are ready to provide valid documentation once you are accepted.

- **Take the time to find the school that works for you**

Selecting a college is a big decision, and there are many factors to consider. School web sites and admissions literature usually give you some information about the

ODS and the policies of the school, but you should take the time to dig deeper and make sure you understand what is available to you and how the system works. Get all the information you need before making the choice – your success in college depends on it!

- **Be prepared and informed**

The more you know before applying to schools, the better. Your Guidance or College Counselor is a good resource for information regarding disabilities and higher education. For additional information, visit AHEAD, the Association on Higher Education and Disability, at www.ahead.org, or the Heath Resource Center at www.heath.gwu.edu.

Everyone deserves to receive the best college experience. Preparing may seem like a lot of work, but your efforts will pay off in the end. Good luck!

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