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Helping Your Students with Disabilities During Their College Search

Over the past decade, the number of students with disabilities enrolling in college has increased steadily. Data are not gathered annually, but the figures compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics show that the number of undergraduates at degree-granting institutions rose from 1,508,000 in 1999 (Snyder & Hoffman 2001) to 2,156,000 enrolled in 2003 (Snyder & Hoffman 2009), a 69 percent increase over only four years. There is no reason to believe that this upward trend has changed in the intervening years. And the recent amendments to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), enacted in January 2009, are expected to add to the number of students applying for accommodations at college, as they have added to the definition of who is considered disabled (AHEAD 2008).

As the number of students requesting accommodations has increased over the past several decades, many colleges have begun looking more carefully at whether these students with disabilities actually qualify for services and accommodations, as the mere presence of a disability doesn't necessarily guarantee them these adjustments (Gregg & Scott 2001). Some schools now critically examine requests and consider whether granting them would mean fundamentally altering their programs, something the ADA expressly states colleges do not have to do (Wolinsky & Whelan 1999). Colleges have also been working against perceptions that accommodating students with disabilities results in "watering down" their programs and allowing students to graduate unqualified (Murray, Wren & Keys 2004). These issues, as well as budgetary concerns, have led many schools to offer students very minimal accommodations and to set high standards for deciding which students are eligible for accommodation.

The disconnect between students' high school services (which tend to be very supportive) and college accommodations can be a shock to some students with disabilities, and cause great stress and anxiety (Hadley 2007). In some cases, lack of access to certain accommodations may make students doubt their ability to succeed (Hadley 2007). Therefore, it is crucial

that students understand the college disability services environment, so they can choose a college that meets their needs and are knowledgeable about how to access the necessary services when they get there.

It can be helpful for college counselors to understand the changes students will experience when they move to college. Having this knowledge will allow counselors to educate students and their families about the disability services environment at particular institutions. Counselors can encourage students and families to consider disability services as an important criteria in their college search. The first step is to have an understanding of how services work at the high school level.

The Law

Students with disabilities in the K-12 system are covered by one of two laws, either the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (commonly referred to as Section 504). Under IDEA, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are written generally for students with learning disabilities. Students with chronic health issues and physical impairments typically receive 504 plans rather than IEPs, while students with visual or hearing impairments typically have IEPs

written for them (this can vary from state to state). Depending upon the state code, students with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD or ADHD) might receive a plan under either law. Written into the plan are the specialized instructional methods, accommodations and other services (such as occupational therapy) that a student will receive.

Identification and Documentation

Certain conditions, such as visual impairments, are typically discovered early in children's development and are evaluated and documented by a medical professional. A letter from a doctor is usually all that school systems require for documentation of a disability in order to offer services to these students.

However, when it comes to learning disabilities, students' difficulties typically don't become obvious until they are in a learning environment. Because of this, school districts are responsible for identifying struggling students, testing them and, if they are found eligible, offering them services and accommodations. The testing used to establish the presence of a disability is called psychoeducational testing. In the evaluation process, students' cognitive ability (commonly known as IQ) is tested and compared against testing of their academic skills (reading, writing, math, and listening). In many districts, if there is a sufficient discrepancy between the skill sets tested (e.g., between students' verbal ability and their reading skills), these students will be found eligible for services for their learning disability, and a plan will be composed to outline the services and accommodations offered to them.

The evaluation battery for ADD will vary from district to district. To date, there is not a single agreed-upon protocol, and no single test is considered to be sufficient and valid for diagnosing ADD. In some districts, a note from a doctor will be sufficient to stand as documentation. In others, the school might evaluate the student using psychoeducational testing as well as other methods.

Protocols and Procedures

When students are found eligible for services, either under IDEA or 504, school districts write formal plans to outline the services and accommodations they will receive. Meetings are held with the parents or guardians every year to review the plan. In many cases, the meeting is a formality, and the plan remains unchanged over the years. In some school districts, students may be tested every three years to make sure that they still meet eligibility standards, though the law no longer requires that schools do this. Even though learning disabilities and ADD aren't outgrown, some students have their services discontinued because their scores on their reevaluation testing do not meet their district's eligibility cutoffs or discrepancy requirements. While some

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districts look critically at students' eligibility when they reevaluate, in many districts, students who are identified for services at any point in their education typically don't undergo such scrutiny, and they are allowed to maintain their services until they graduate even if their more recent testing does not meet the district's eligibility requirements.

Accommodations

Like eligibility standards, accommodations and services will vary, too, depending upon district resources and students' needs. Students with various kinds of disabilities may be allowed extra time to take tests and complete assignments. Many will be assigned a few periods each week to work in a learning or resource center with a state-certified learning disabilities specialist in order to learn compensatory strategies and to work on assignments. Some will receive specialized instruction directly linked to their disability (e.g. Orton Gillingham, a program designed to help dyslexics learn to read). Students with significant motor problems may be provided with a one-on-one aide to help them maneuver through their school day and scribe for them during tests and assignments. Students with visual impairments will receive their texts and assignments in alternative formats, such as Braille or auditory formats, or they may have a human reader to help them. All of these services and aids students receive from their district are provided free of charge.

Parental Involvement

Some parents may be accustomed to playing an active part in their child's educational services. There are those who request that schools provide them with weekly, or even daily, reports on their child's progress, homework completion, etc. Others lobby

for their school districts to provide their students with numerous services and supports, and they research new interventions and ask schools to invest in them. In many districts, parents get quite involved in their student's day-to-day academic lives and choosing accommodations and services for their child. Since students' 504 plans or IEPs aren't valid without their parents' signature, schools must involve parents in the planning process for their children.

Once you have a foundation in high school special education services, it's easier to understand why so many families are shocked to find out how these services change at the college level. Disability services at many colleges only remotely resemble the system to which families are accustomed. As they direct them through the college search process, it is crucial for counselors to educate families about these changes so that students and families can consider schools' disability services as part of the college selection process.

Students who were identified with disabilities before they arrive at college have to submit proof of their disability, called documentation, to the proper office or administrator. The requirements for this paperwork will vary by disability category and from college to college. For learning disabilities, the testing students undergo at their high schools is typically sufficient for documentation at college.

The Law

Part of the reason for the changes in disability services after high school is that colleges are not subject to IDEA, which only applies to students in the K-12 system. Since IDEA no longer applies after students graduate high school, their IEPs are no longer valid. In other words, they "expire" when students graduate, meaning that they have no legal standing in the college environment.

Students covered under Section 504 will also find that their plans "expire" once they graduate from high school. It is important for them to know that, even though colleges must follow Section 504, they still aren't bound by students' 504 plans. Many families harbor the misconception that since colleges are subject to Section 504, students' 504 plans will work at college. Like IEPs, 504 plans are written by high schools for use at those high schools; they have no application after graduation.

Students who were covered by IDEA may find that their accommodations at college are very different than they were in high school. This is because IDEA is an *education law*, and Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the two laws that cover colleges, are actually *anti-discrimination laws*. IDEA requires K-12 districts to provide specialized instruction and very supportive services in order to help students achieve their maximum potential. Section 504 and the ADA, on the other hand, simply require colleges to provide students with disabilities with access to their programs, not specialized education or enough accommodations to make them as successful as their peers. In fact, Section 504 specifically says that "...aids, benefits, and services, to be equally effective, are not required to produce the identical result or level of achievement for handicapped and nonhandicapped persons" (**34 C.F.R. §104.4**). This is a major difference from the emphasis in high school. Students with 504 plans will likely experience similar changes to their accommodations because the law requires less of colleges than it does of high schools with regard to supporting students.

Identification and Documentation

Unlike schools in the K-12 system, colleges are not responsible for figuring out who amongst their students has a disability. Instead, the burden is on the student. Students with disabilities at college must identify themselves to the appropriate office or dean (typically through email or a phone call), provide the necessary paperwork required, and they may have to come for a meeting with a disability coordinator before they can be considered for services. Students who do not request disability services, even if they have obvious physical handicaps, will not be offered accommodations by their college unless they request them.

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Students with ADD are likely to find, depending upon the college they choose, that the burden of proof is much different than it was for them in high school. Many colleges are now beginning to require psychoeducational testing as part of the

documentation requirements for ADD, in addition to other kinds of measures. High schools are not required to evaluate students using these testing protocols just because students plan to attend a college that requires it; they only have to do what is relevant to their own services. So students may have to seek out and pay for the testing they'll need for their college. But these students should not pursue any additional testing until they are sure the college they want to attend requires it. All of this information can be found on the disability services office Web site, usually under a tag or heading that says "documentation guidelines." There will be specific guidelines for different kinds of disabilities. After they look at the documentation guidelines or requirements, students who think that they need additional testing should call the Disability Services office to confirm this before they schedule a testing appointment.

Families need to understand that the law allows colleges to decide for themselves what their documentation and eligibility requirements are. Some students whose scores on psychoeducational testing qualified them for services in high school may find that they don't get them anything at a particular college. As long as colleges hew closely to typical guidelines in the field for these decisions, the law allows them to set their own criteria, which can vary from college to college. This means that some, though not many, students with learning disabilities and ADD will not be found eligible for services at the college they attend.

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Protocols

Many students have little involvement in the yearly review of their plan in high school. In fact, some may not even know what accommodations are written into their plan, some don't use what is there, and many likely have no idea why such adjustments have been offered to them. Too often, students are left out of the IEP process in high school.

However, in college, nothing happens without the student's involvement first. Students must initiate the accommodation process by applying for adjustments through the school's procedures. If they are found eligible, they may receive a letter or email outlining their approved accommodations, but colleges do not write formal plans like the ones high schools compose.

Also, once they are approved, it is typically students' responsibility to alert their professors about their approved accommodations, usually by delivering the Letter of Accommodation provided by the disability services office. And students also have to participate in the planning for their accommodations, by doing things such as giving a minimum amount of notice to the disability services office before exams for which they need accommodations. Students who fail to complete any of these parts of the process may find that they don't receive their accommodations. Students can make complaints about not receiving accommodations, either through the college's own grievance process, the Office for Civil Rights (the government office that responds to these complaints), or a lawsuit, but if an investigation finds they failed to complete any part of the accommodation process that was their responsibility (such as giving five days notice before an exam), they will get no relief.

Accommodations

Reasons why they're different: Because the emphasis in the governing laws is on avoiding discrimination, not on education, and the laws tend to treat institutions of higher education with great deference, colleges have a lot of leeway in deciding what accommodations they will grant. The emphasis is on leveling the playing field for students with disabilities, not raising their performance to the level of their peers.

Another change in emphasis at the college level that often affects accommodations is the focus on making students into independent learners who use compensatory strategies and assistive technology to help them get around their areas of weakness. Colleges expect students to be in charge of their own learning and to find ways to get information they need on their own; therefore, many colleges will not offer some of the accommodations that students have used in high school because these adjustments do not promote students' independence.

In addition, the laws allow colleges to hold to their entrance, general distribution, major, and graduation requirements. This means that some students will not be eligible for admission because they haven't taken certain courses that are required for consideration, and others who are admitted might have to take college courses in subjects that were waived for them in high school. For instance, colleges can require students to learn a foreign language in order to graduate; no exceptions have to be made for students with disabilities. In addition, programs may have technical standards that do not have to be waived. For example, an engineering school can refuse to allow students to use calculators on their exams if it can make an argument that doing so would "fundamentally alter" (ADA 1990) its program.

At many colleges, students will have to justify their requests for accommodation with evidence from their documentation that proves such adjustments are necessary. Colleges do not have to offer accommodations and services simply because they have been recommended in students' plans or because students have historically received them at the high school level. Instead, many colleges will not offer accommodations unless they can see a reason to in the testing or students can make a case that convinces the disability services staff that they are necessary.

As a result of all these factors, students may find that accommodations to which they have become accustomed in high school are unavailable to them at college. And the law says this is okay.

Accommodations Commonly Approved and Not Approved

Accommodations that may not be hard to get once students are found eligible for services can include time-and-a-half to take in-class tests, permission to record lectures and access to texts in alternative formats. There are also several accommodations that students may not find available to them in their new academic world.

One of the biggest changes students will find in available services is tutoring. There is no law saying that colleges have to provide tutoring of any kind to anyone. Most schools do, because they are running a business and they want students' tuition dollars. But even at some of the most competitive schools, the only tutoring available may be done by other students. Even for students with disabilities, the law does not require one-on-one tutoring, instruction in special strategies or techniques, or tutoring by an experienced, qualified teacher. This an important point for students to understand.

Section 504 says that colleges "...need not provide attendants, individually prescribed devices, readers for personal use or study, or other devices or services of a personal nature." This means that students with physical disabilities who require

assistance for personal care (e.g. dressing, feeding, bathing) can have such an aide come to classes and live with them, but the college will not pay the assistant's salary, and disability services offices don't have someone on staff to provide such help, either. Students with significant physical needs may be able to find an aide and get his/her salary paid through a government department such as vocational rehabilitation or other related offices. Such arrangements are commonplace, but students should contact the appropriate agency for help several months before they graduate from high school.

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Students with other kinds of significant needs who were assigned an aide throughout school to help them in the classroom may find that they are not given permission to have an assistant attend classes or live with them, even if they are willing to pay for the services of such an aide. (An example of such a condition is Asperger Syndrome.) Depending upon their disabling condition, students who cannot function at college without the assistance of a personal aide may not be considered qualified to attend that college. This is a determination that the law allows colleges to make. The law's strong stance on personal aids and colleges' goal to make students more independent can affect accommodations for students with other kinds of disabilities, too. Students with hearing impairments may find that their school prefers to accommodate them through captioning technology rather than with sign language interpreters. Students with visual impairments

and reading disorders may find that they are required to learn to use text-to-speech software because their college does not provide human readers for exams and assignments. Eliminating human assistance in these forms helps to cut colleges' budgets (interpreters, for example, can be quite costly, and colleges don't like to pay when students don't come to class and forget to cancel the interpreters) and promote independence, so many colleges are moving in this direction.

Because of the focus on students' independence, another accommodation students may be used to from high school that they are unlikely to receive in college is study guides provided by professors or tutors. Once students arrive at college, it is considered reasonable to expect them to figure out how to prepare for their exams without having someone tell them what to study. Students who have become reliant upon others to prepare study guides will have to quickly learn how to do this for themselves.

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Double time or more for exams (as opposed to time-and-a-half, which is typically approved) may be available, but the burden of proof for the necessity of this will be much heavier than it was when students were in high school. Unlimited time will be difficult to get at almost any college, and for a very good reason. If a school agrees to "unlimited" time, it has to allow students as much time as they say they need—it can't set any limits. Some

college disability services offices have even had students request several days to take each exam. So most colleges will reject such a request and offer time-and-a-half or double time instead.

On a related note, students will also find that most colleges don't approve "alternative format" exams. Alternative formats that are commonly requested are take-home exams (in place of exams taken in the classroom), essay exams in place of multiple choice tests, multiple choice questions in place of essays, and projects or oral reports instead of papers. These are accommodations that some students get accustomed to in high school but colleges generally reject, claiming that a change to test format will "fundamentally alter" their programs, which the ADA explicitly says they don't have to do.

In addition to the legal argument, colleges resist test accommodations because they don't like to tell professors what kinds of exams are appropriate in their classes (and many professors, for their part, don't like to be told how to run their classes). Also, even if professors agree to an alternative format, creating two different exams raises the worry that students will claim that the alternative version they took was harder than the original version taken by the class. While a few exceptions are made for students with serious, relevant disabilities (e.g. a student with a severe brain injury that affects his memory might be granted multiple choice exams), most colleges won't approve such alterations, even for students who have a long history of having the exam format of their choice.

Notetakers may be easily available or not, depending upon the school's philosophy and its resources. At some schools, the philosophy may be that students need to acquire notetaking skills as a life skill and that handing students a copy of someone else's notes is not helping them to do this. Also, many colleges have to rely on volunteers to take notes, and they may have problems with quality and with volunteers' class attendance. These schools will typically offer students with disabilities the loan of a digital recorder so they can record their classes and use them to catch what they missed after class. Students' preference for a notetaker or their unwillingness to learn to use a digital recorder effectively (i.e., without listening to an entire lecture over again) is not considered sufficient reason to provide a notetaker rather than an alternative accommodation.

Extended time to complete papers and out-of-class assignments is not offered at a lot of colleges because many of them share the philosophy and experience that allowing extended time to students who already have a time-management problem will only allow them to procrastinate for longer, creating bigger problems for themselves. On many campuses, there are tutoring centers where students can get help in managing their time and planning for long-term assignments. This is considered an

appropriate alternative to providing extra time for assignments and papers, which typically results in papers piling up by the end of the semester.

Parents who are accustomed to being involved in their student's education may be greatly upset by the changes they encounter at the college level. Many will be surprised by the fact that students are considered adults in the eyes of the law once they enroll at college, even if they are not yet 18. It's also surprising for many when they learn that the Family Rights Education Privacy Act (FERPA), protects the privacy of students' records, even from the parents who are paying for their education.

Parents

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While the law does not specifically prohibit such an action, many colleges, adopting the spirit of the law, will not allow parents to make accommodation requests for their children. Every year, parents call disability services offices at colleges to try to do this because they fear, often rightly, that their student won't call to ask for services. Some colleges may use such a call as a prompt to at least call or email students to let them know their

parents were concerned, and they may send these students some information about the request process. Others will not do this, as they see it as a violation of students' privacy. Still others won't do it because they feel that students should take on the responsibility for themselves, and they interpret the fact that students have not requested accommodations as a sign that they don't want or need them. Parents who are accustomed to "calling the shots" in their child's education may be very upset about their inability to do so once their students reach college.

It is important to understand the changes that students with disabilities will encounter when they get to college. After educating students and their families about these changes, next help emphasize to them the importance of considering disability services at each college on their list as an essential part of their college search, and assist them with this research.

Since Section 504 and the ADA apply to any college that accepts federal funds (i.e., student loans), it is likely that any school your students are considering has to provide services and accommodations for students with disabilities. Students can be assured that they can expect at least the very minimal services already described at any college on their list.

Students should know there are different levels of service available at different colleges. Many colleges can provide only what might be called "compliance-only" services. At these schools, minimal accommodations are available (and there is no charge for them), such as extended time for tests and the opportunity to record classes. At the next level, students may have access to special tutors or coaches, special review sessions and other more supportive services. These are typically available to anyone approved for disability services, and there usually is no extra charge for these services. At the highest level, there will be a separate special program with its own admission standards. These programs may be run out of the disability services office, but they are not a substitute for the compliance-level services all colleges have to provide to all approved students with disabilities free of charge. Instead, they are offered in addition to the

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Regardless of what level of service students are seeking, they should do their research on disability services for every college they are considering. They can start this research with the homepage for the disability services office. While they shouldn't be too impressed with a fancy Web site, they can use the site to find out what kinds of accommodations are commonly offered and what other additional (free or fee-for-service) services are available.

mandated services and are designed to be very supportive. At most colleges that offer these programs, students first have to be admitted to the university, then they may apply to the special LD or ADD program, though policies vary. The fees for these programs run from \$1,000 to \$3,000 a semester and, typically, their goal is to gradually wean students off of their intensive services before they graduate.

Families should know that even paying for an expensive support program will not guarantee students access to the kind of qualified learning disabilities specialist or ADD coach that they worked with in high school. No one can work as a high school special education teacher or case manager without being certified in that field by the state. But the law does not set any standard for who can work for disability services offices or these special fee-for-service programs at the college level. Not all of these offices or programs are staffed by people with degrees and/or experience in special education (or in education at all; many come from other backgrounds, like social work). Sometimes the people working in these programs have simply been given several hours of training by others in the department (who may or may not have relevant training themselves). These staff members won't necessarily have the kind of background families might expect when they pay extra for such a service, so it is important for families to ask questions. They shouldn't simply be impressed when a staff member is called a "learning specialist" or "academic coach." Instead, they should ask very specific questions about staff members' education and experience, as these titles don't correspond to any specific master's degree or certification at the college level.

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Many sites offer brief biographies of the office staff members, which will give families a sense of the kind of backgrounds they have. Parents may be surprised to discover that many colleges' disability services offices are staffed by people who may be deans with academic backgrounds or by individuals who come from counseling centers; this is fairly typical, especially at smaller schools. Generally, the state schools are a better bet for finding disability services directors and coordinators who are educated and experienced in working with students with disabilities. This doesn't mean that other staff members don't do a good job helping their students. But families should make sure they know what they are paying for when they send their student to a school.

Some sites will give examples of what kinds of accommodations are commonly granted. If a school's site doesn't do this, families can call and ask. It's safe to say that disability services offices will be quite honest in responding to such inquiries. Since disability services are removed from the admission process (except when they have a special fee-for-service program), staff members are unlikely to try to sell students on services they cannot or will not offer. It does not behoove disability services staff members to lie to students about services and accommodations and then have them show up expecting to have access to them. Generally students will get honest answers from staff members when they ask about what they might (emphasis on might—decisions are made on a case-by-case basis, not by category of disability) receive at their target colleges.

Families should also click on any links they see to other sources of support on campus. These may include a tutoring center (sometimes called a learning center, academic support center,

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learning resource center, or other similar name), writing center, math tutoring center, or the like. While these services may not work with disability services directly, it will give families a sense of what kinds of help students can seek, especially if they are not found eligible for disability services or don't receive all of the accommodations they seek there.

Before they make a campus visit, advise students to make an appointment to meet with someone in disability services while they're on campus (one-person offices or departments may not be staffed in the summer). While there, they should see whether there are special rooms for accommodated testing, look at any adaptive technology labs, and see what other kinds of special resources are available. They might even ask if there is a student who uses services frequently and successfully who would be willing to meet with them. Only a student can tell another what the college environment is really like, especially when it comes to specifics like professors' reactions when they hand them the Letter of Accommodation or how effective they think the accommodations and services are. At some schools, if the families ask in advance, the director or disability coordinator might even be willing to look over students' documentation to tell families what might be

missing and what accommodations might be available based on the paperwork (most won't commit until the students are enrolled, but they might be willing to give families an idea about this).

Once students gather this information about disability services, they will be able to consider it as another facet of their target colleges. For some students, especially those who have received a lot of support in high school, access to certain services may be crucial to their success (though they should keep in mind that certain accommodations simply won't be available at the college level). For others who use minimal accommodations in high school, these services may not be as important as other considerations in their college decisions. However, students who are accustomed to using only a few accommodations should keep in mind that the academic environment in college is quite different from the one to which they are accustomed in high school, and they may require different adjustments in their new environment. Whatever they decide, they need counselors to alert them to the changes at colleges so that they can do the proper research and make an educated decision about the best college for them and their individual needs.

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