

## Looking Back and Planning Ahead: Reflections from a College Office of Student Disabilities Services

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It is every parent's desire to reduce or eliminate stress for their child with LD during the high school years. While not easily accomplished, parents enjoy enormous satisfaction when things seem to be going well, and homework and other assignments get done on time and in a pain-free manner (One parent explained to me that their measure of success was whether the family could sit together and engage in calm dinnertime discussions). When asked to reflect on their journey, parents almost always say that the essential ingredient to alleviating stress for their child in high school was the Committee on Special Education (CSE) meeting. While school district personnel were busy writing short and long-term goals, checking class sizes and making note of test scores to document eligibility for classification and services, parents reported the CSE meetings as a sort of video game adventure; try to score as many points (academic adjustments) as you can while engaging the other player (the school district). Accumulate enough points (e.g. course credits, grade point average) to graduate and maintain a balance of low levels of stress and high levels of academic adjustments, with the prize being permission to move up to the next level (post secondary education).

So, does a hyper-supportive high school experience lead to success at the next level? For many students, unfortunately not. I find that far too many students with LD and other special needs to be unaware and unprepared for the types of changes that they will almost immediately encounter at the collegiate level. From dorm life (no explanation needed) to half-life (a topic covered in basic science classes) and social sciences to the social scene, being unprepared to negotiate the new and often initially overwhelming demands of life on campus can certainly become the cornerstone to failure.

### Warning!

Do not discuss the following topics prior to or during dinnertime, as doing so may result in anger, frustration and indigestion.

Consider the following:

A full-time college student will attend classes approximately 12-15 hours each week, while a high school student is in class 36 hours per week. The implications for a parent?

- The idea is not to have to cancel your Yoga class, find menus for local restaurants that deliver and hire a dog walker for Fluffy. Parents should not expect to carry the burden of the changes in their child's workload. The goal (which surely takes a great deal of planning and practice), is to help your child be successful (and increasingly independent) in their new setting.

Some suggestions and comments:

Having you child enroll in a local college's summer course allows everyone to 'test the waters' and gain a realistic understanding of what to expect on the college campus.

- While summer classes compress a sixteen week course into a fast-paced six week timeframe, they provide a window of opportunity to see how your child will deal with many of the academic and social stressors encountered during a traditional postsecondary semester.

- At home, after expectations are articulated and routines are established, try to pull back your level of ‘control’ (and voluntary support) as a sort of litmus test, especially for students preparing to live on campus. And do not be surprised when simply failing to say, “Please don’t forget to do your homework before going out” leads to unfinished assignments.

How important is it that your child make him or herself known to the student support center at college? VERY IMPORTANT. Whether your child is eager to arrange for supportive services from the start or whether their decision is to try to make a go of it without any help, having proper documentation (kept confidential) on file will:

- Allow Office of Disability Services personnel get to know your child’s profile (areas of interest, strength, and need) so quick decisions can be made and action taken if the need for help arises
- Prevent any confusion and allay any concerns about whether your child is eligible for services and supports at the college level

Without careful planning, setting a course to help your child get support while attending college can make you feel like a trail-blazer on the Lewis and Clark Expedition. For high school students who were accustomed to having access to resource room personnel, collaborative teachers and parents mapping the way to academic support services, the shift in responsibility from teachers and parents to the student in creating and maintaining appropriate support services can be paralyzing. Take advantage of whatever time you can during your child’s remaining high school years, include your child in all aspects of the special education decision-making process, and provide them with frequent opportunities (you may need to model these conversations a few times) to communicate directly with their teachers regarding the specific types of support they need to be successful.

How will life be if you and your child do not prepare for the transition to college? If I asked Fluffy, the dog, the same question, I’m sure that his answer would correctly be an emphatic “Ruff.”

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