

Navigating the College

By Christina Fabrey, BCC, ACAC

PHILLIP, A FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENT with long hair and a tie-dyed shirt, comes into my office a little frantic after his first exam. “I just can’t take tests in the classroom,” he explains. “I hear every little noise in the background—a lawn mower outside, a classmate tapping a pencil, and my anxiety starts kicking in.”

When Stephanie arrives in my office, she immediately pulls out her course syllabi and class planner, color coded and tagged. She explains that she has a three-hour exam in a class that meets one time a week. “There’s no way I can sit through an exam for three hours!” She wants to do well this semester, but she is fidgety and needs some breaks when sitting for long periods of time.

Sarah comes in disheveled and tired two days before the end of the semester. “Christina, I haven’t changed clothes in three days. I have been in the Commons writing my papers 24/7. I’ve always been able to get by on my ability to hyperfocus, but it’s finally too much. I have two exams to study for and three papers due in the next two days. I know I should have come earlier, but now I need help.”

Each of these students is discovering the challenges of dealing with ADHD at the college level. Of course academic accommodations are available to college students with disabilities, but the support offered may be very different from what they experienced in high school. At the postsecondary level, accommodations are more focused on access than success.

Proactive approaches

The process of receiving accommodations in college cannot begin until documentation is received. Even then, the student must request accommodations in order to receive them. At most schools they must make their own appointments at a learning center, where services are generally the same for all students; in addition, the staff and faculty may have no special training or experience in working with students with disabilities.

According to a recent national study of students who start a four-year program at a postsecondary institution, only 34.2 percent of those with diagnosed disabilities complete the program. These students are frequently challenged by the need to focus and stay on task, organize their time and workload, interact with their professors and peers, administer their own medication, and even develop daily living skills. Often students with ADHD find that the skills that they used to cope in high school are no longer adequate for the more demanding and independent college atmosphere. They need more structure and support to succeed in this environment.

QUESTIONS TO ASK DISABILITY SUPPORT PROVIDERS

Before accepting an offer, ask the following:

- What accommodations are offered to students with ADHD? What procedures should I be aware of in order to receive these accommodations?
- What information would you like ADHD documentation to contain in order to qualify for academic accommodations and how current does it need to be?
- If a student’s accommodations are not being met, how is the situation resolved?
- What percentage of your students utilize your services?
- What is the average caseload of people working with students with disabilities?
- What experience with ADHD and executive function challenges do you provide?
- Is there an adaptive technology lab on campus?
- Is there a support group on campus for students with ADHD?
- Do disability-support providers also act as academic advisors or student liaisons?
- To what extent do college counseling services provide treatment (medication and/or psychotherapy) for students with ADHD?
- What supports do you provide beyond accommodations? What services on campus support planning, organizational, and study skills?
- Is ADHD coaching a service available on campus? If not, can you provide me with a list of local coaches?

Accommodations Process



Parents can help by encouraging their children to assume responsibility for their own academic success before they set foot on a college campus. However, children who are resistant to the idea of utilizing supports may need more of a nudge to get started.

While ideally students will meet with their disability-support provider to activate accommodations as soon as they arrive on campus, in reality they may walk in at any time during the semester to activate their plans. Unfortunately, most could use the support earlier.

Parents should play an active and supportive role in helping their children receive all the help a college can provide. Here are some ways to get involved:

- **Involve them.** Your child should have a general understanding of his or her disability, and be able to identify his or her goals, strengths, and areas of need. The more your child can self-advocate now, the more comfortable this new relationship will be in college.
- **Act now.** Prior to enrollment in college, make sure that your child has all the paperwork and current documentation needed to obtain services. Postsecondary institutions expect a reasonable level of documentation, so check the requirements listed under the college's website to make sure the documentation meets current criteria.
- **Visit.** Get to know the disability-support provider on campus and be-

come acquainted with the space before your child moves onto campus. How well does your child connect with the staff? Is the space an inclusive, comfortable environment? This personal connection will be a key component in making a student comfortable.

- **Size matters!** The number of students disability-support providers see varies greatly depending on the institution. A typical provider serve anywhere from thirty to three hundred students. The size of a caseload can impact the amount of personalized attention a student receives.
- **Send documentation in as soon as you submit your deposit to the college.** While you can provide documentation at any point during the school year, if your child is reluctant to disclose his or her disability, having these files already on hand will reduce the paperwork necessary if they need to disclose.
- **Step back.** At the college level, students must be able to advocate for themselves. Usually, the student must make an appointment with the disability-support services to discuss accommodations needs. A disability-support provider may want to speak with your child alone. That's okay! You will also have a chance to share your concerns, but let your child have the first opportunity. If your child forgets to discuss a key need, you might prompt your child with an open ended question, such as "Explain why you have found note-taking support to be so important to you in class."
- **Consider a parental contract.** Some of the most successful students I work with have a written contract with their parents about academic expectations. Parents have much more leverage with their child than anyone in the postsecondary environment. Providing tangible rewards for students (for example, the use of the car or paying their cellphone bill) can be motivation for getting to class, seeing an academic tutor, or even activating and using accommodations.
- **Build your network.** Parents, the disability-support provider, college counselors, and faculty will all be part of your child's network at college. Encourage your child to cultivate these relationships by introducing themselves and explaining their strengths and needs.
- **Hire an ADHD coach.** Disability-support professionals should be able to provide such accommodations for students with ADHD as distraction-reduced testing, extended time on tests, a way to record class lectures, and a notetaker in class. However, some students need more support developing academic and self-advocacy skills, as well as the more regular contact that a private coach can provide.
Parents can play an important role in helping their children navigate a new system as they take over for themselves. The more you can encourage and support your child in their growth and self-discovery, the more likely they will find ways to succeed in the independent environment of college. **A**

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