

# What You Need To Know About College Readiness



by Katherine McGavern

## FINALLY! AFTER YEARS OF LIVING WITH AND MANAGING YOUR TEEN'S ADHD—

the constant reminders, last-minute crises, chaos containment and frantic trips to school with the term paper/soccer cleats/inhaler—he or she will soon be headed for college. Depending on your style of parenting, you're now either looking with relief at the upcoming finish line, or you're ramping up your game, getting ready to be a full-service remote personal administrative assistant to her when she gets to campus.

As the mother of two college graduates who have ADHD, I have lived through both the relief and the dread of dropping them off on their first day of college. I sometimes wonder how we did it.

Make no mistake: There's a lot on the line that day.

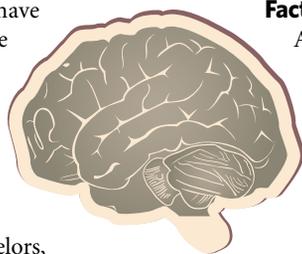
After seventeen-plus years of living within the built-in structures of home, school, and community, under the watchful eye of teachers, coaches, counselors, parents and other caregivers, your son or daughter is about to be cut loose. Set free! Free to eat meals and go to bed—or *not*.

Free to go to class or nap or study or complete assignments and turn in papers—or *not*. Free to drink and smoke whenever and whatever they like with whom-ever they like, to leave campus, to travel—in short, free to make *all* life decisions *with complete autonomy and virtually no supervision*.

Further, they'll be making all these decisions with their ADHD brain! As well you know, this brain's executive functions are ... challenged. You've watched this brain struggle with virtually every aspect of self-regulation: organization, time awareness, pacing, prioritizing, any kind of planning, starting and completing tasks, and inhibiting impulses, to name a few.

And inevitably there is the scariest reality of all (which you initially thought was the staggering financial commitment involved, but wasn't): By taking this major step, your child will be risking the very real possibility of failure. When you reflect on all the failures this brave young person has already endured trying to survive in a conventional school setting (universally ADHD un-friendly), you wonder: If he fails at this, can he survive it, and continue to believe in himself? Can I? If the task is simply too overwhelming, can I be certain she won't be crushed by her own disappointment, feel despair and hopelessness, possibly even do harm to herself? Can he recover? What can I do to help?

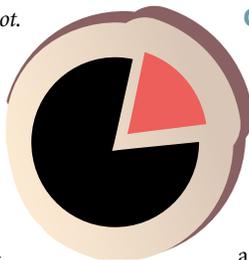
As a coach for college students and adults with ADHD, I have observed this dilemma at close range, and have concluded that it's important—and useful—for everyone to step back here and review the facts.



### Fact 1: AN ADHD BRAIN MUST BE MANAGED.

An ADHD diagnosis, regardless of when it is made and of almost every other factor involved, yields this one central imperative.

Left unmanaged, the potential for disaster is substantial. Managed, this brain is completely capable of being productive, creative, resourceful, dependable, and even of producing extraordinary accomplishments.

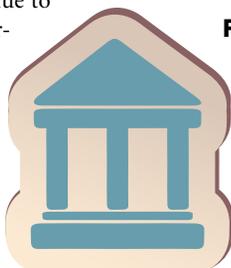


### Fact 2: IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT TO BE CLEAR ABOUT WHOSE JOB IS IT TO DO THE MANAGING, AND WHEN.

Naturally when the ADHD diagnosis involves a child, it falls to parents to take charge, and to begin putting ADHD-useful structures and systems in place. Ideally, as the child grows, the parents involve him in the process and help him understand his special brain—both the positive and the negative aspects—and some ways to make it work better.

By late high school, if the parents have continued to encourage their teen's participation in his own brain-management and helped him develop some basic life skills (see the Independence Skills sidebar on page 16), it is the parents' job to step out of their CEO role and move toward their next position: *consultant*, always available to advise but not to decide.

In the optimal scenario, everyone involved understands this shift and why it is taking place. The process is seldom smooth or easy, and will inevitably include some breakage, but it is vitally important for the successful transition to college years. Why? Because...



### Fact 3. ONCE ON CAMPUS, YOUR YOUNG ADULT IS IN CHARGE, AND YOU ARE NOT.

As unsettling and shocking as this feels, it is essentially the fact of the matter. And in my experience, the sooner the parents recognize and accept this fact, the better the outcome—for everyone.

Every parent who has lived through such transition knows there is a large terror component involved. Who will make sure she's awake every



## INDEPENDENCE SKILLS

High school seniors—listen up! You'll need these basic skills for college, so start practicing ASAP!

- **Take sole responsibility for waking up.** Try different strategies until you find one that works consistently, and use it. Every day. No exceptions.
- **Start doing your own laundry once a week,** on a schedule.
- **Get your own credit or debit card and start using it.**
  - Understand what a credit rating is and the long-range negative consequences of misusing a credit card.
  - Negotiate with parents the list of expenditures they will cover and expenditures you will cover, both now and when you go away. Your income source? You need one to pay your expenses! A job now will be good practice for a job on campus.
  - Review monthly statements with a parent, pay each bill in full on time—no credit card debt allowed.
- **Do your own scheduling.** Even if you already use Google calendar, start using a hard-copy calendar (week-at-a-glance view with space for separate TO-DO list works best) to schedule Must-Do's. Begin habit of scheduling study time, the individual steps of a long-range project, extracurricular activities, social plans, laundry time, break plans, etc., and all other Must-Do's.
- **Manage your own medications.** Get prescriptions renewed and refilled on time, have a system for taking them as prescribed, meet with provider as needed. Discuss with your parents how you will get meds on campus.

morning? How will he ever finish a twenty-page paper *and turn it in on time*? What happens if she gets behind and her overwhelm-paralysis kicks in? Who's going to manage his meds? What if she stops taking them? What about *the parties*?

Take a deep breath and then take in the following fact.

### Fact 4. THERE ARE RESOURCES OUT THERE TO HELP.

In fact, you may have chosen a particular college because of its excellent support system for students with ADHD (see sidebar on page 17. So, depending on the school, your student may find:

- **Student Disabilities Office**—various accommodations and support services such as:
  - Mentors to help with adjusting to new routines, familiarization with non-academic aspects of campus life, scheduling, etc.
  - Short courses on time management, organization, project planning, thesis-writing, etc.
  - Alternate test-taking locations
  - Writing assistants to help with long papers and projects
  - Study buddies
  - Trained coaches
- **Campus Counseling Office**—therapy usually available at no cost for eligible students.
- **Campus infirmary**—may provide help with medications
- **Dorm personnel**—usually upperclassmen, their proximity a plus!
- **Off-campus resources**—therapists, psychiatrists, ADHD coaches, tutors, learning specialists, etc., if necessary.

So now, your job is to delegate! Book short meetings with all of these providers either just before or shortly after the big Drop-Off-at-College day (no need to share this with the student in question). Introduce yourself, give them a short introduction to your student (include diagnostic and relevant high school accommodation documents if you feel it's appropriate), and learn what they offer. Give them all your contact information, and thank them for the support they're providing your nervous system as you adjust to your new non-CEO status.



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## RESOURCES TO HELP WITH COLLEGE CHOICE



- **The K&W Guide to College Programs & Services for Students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, 11th Edition** (Princeton Review, 2012). You can also search at [www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com).
- **Peterson's Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities or ADHD**, 8th Edition (Peterson's, 2007). Also search at [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com).
- **The HEATH Resource Center**, managed by The George Washington University Graduate School of Education and Human Development, is a web-based clearinghouse that serves as an information exchange of educational resources, support services, and opportunities. For more information, go to <http://www.heath.gwu.edu/>.
- **Learning How to Learn: Getting Into and Surviving College When You Have a Learning Disability**, by Joyanne Cobb (Child & Family Press, 2003). Written for high school and college students with learning disabilities, this book addresses preparing for college, choosing the right school, and succeeding academically. See also <http://www.learn-howtolearn.org>.

NOTE: Make sure your new college student signs a release that allows the above providers to discuss their case with you. Providers are otherwise prohibited by law to speak with you about difficulties your child may be having, regardless of how severe they might be.

Finally, when you leave your suddenly-more-beautiful-than-you-remembered child, surrounded by piles of belongings (but the bed made), make certain you leave your son or daughter with the clear understanding that you are on his or her team. That you trust him to do his best with this great new adventure, that you are always there to help (advise but not decide), and that no matter what, you support and love him. Be sure she knows that the option to come home (and possibly regroup at a local community college or work or volunteer for a time), is *absolutely fine* with you. And then get out of there before you start crying. 🗣️

**Katherine McGavern** has been working in the ADHD world for over twenty years, beginning with the diagnosis of her oldest son in 1990, followed by that of her youngest son in 1994. In 2006, McGavern became a certified Parent to Parent teacher. She completed her ADHD coach training with Susan Sussman, founder of the American Coaching Institute, in 2007. McGavern coaches adults with ADHD; presents widely to teachers (K-12), community organizations, and parent groups; provides training on ADHD to student teachers at The College of New Jersey; and sits on the editorial advisory board of Attention. She is a co-founding member of CHADD Mercer County, and facilitates at their monthly meetings in Princeton, New Jersey.

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