



Is There a “Right Fit” College for My Student with ADHD?

by Sue Cook Christakos, JD

MY COLLEAGUES AND I ARE OFTEN ASKED, “Are there colleges that work best for students with ADHD?” While we wish that we could answer this question with a list of colleges, the process of finding the “right fit” college is complicated. However, there are a few important tips that we share with families to help them find colleges where their student with ADHD can be successful.

The first tip is to understand that once your student crosses the high school graduation stage onto the college campus, the law governing supports and services changes. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) governs colleges, and it is a civil rights statute, not an education law. It does not set specific requirements that colleges must abide by in every case, but merely requires that colleges provide “access” to any student with a disability.

What does this mean? Essentially, colleges must meet the minimal requirements of establishing an Accessibil-

ity Services office and staffing the office with someone who will oversee the accommodation process. Thankfully, many colleges go above and beyond the minimal requirements set forth in the ADA, and provide a range of supports and services. However, since there are over 4,000 four-year colleges in the United States, the process of identifying the appropriate level of support can feel overwhelming.

The second tip we offer to lessen the stress is *Do your homework*. Start with your student, determining the type



of support he or she has used to be successful, and then begin your investigation into the type of support found at the college. Where to begin? Books and websites focusing on learning support for the student with ADHD are a good start; however, in our practice, we found it helpful to provide families a framework of the different levels of learning support available.

We divide colleges into four separate categories that exist on a continuum of support, from those that provide the minimum required by the ADA, to those that offer more intensive individualized support. Working within this framework, we find it is easier for families to find the “right fit” college. Below is a summary of each category, keeping in mind that the demarcations between each are not rigid and can certainly change with changes in staffing, funding, etc.

Category 1—Compliance

These colleges provide the most basic of accommodations and services, such as extra time, note-taking, etc., and it is solely up to the student to obtain and utilize the supports and services. Colleges in this category typically have a small staff and a large number of registered students, often found at larger institutions. Generally, we find that many of our students with ADHD require more individualized attention.

Category 2—Learning Services

The second, and largest category, is made up of colleges that offer a range of services—and these vary widely given that the ADA does not provide a template. It is important to emphasize that there is no “perfect” school for students who have ADHD. To find whether or not the range of services matches the needs of your student, you may want to use the following questions as a guide in your research.

- **Staffing.** What is the background of the staff in Accessibility Services? Are they professional learning specialists who have a background in special education? Do they have the time to meet 1:1 with my student throughout the semester?
- **Tutors.** Is there a tutoring center on campus, or is tutoring departmental? Are the tutors peers, trained peers, or professional? Are there weekly limits on the number of tutoring sessions allowed per class per student?
- **Learning Center.** Is there a learning center on campus? If so, is it centrally located and open to all students?
- **Testing Center.** Is there a testing center on campus

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where my student can take his or her exams in a distraction reduced environment?

- **Executive Functioning Support.** Is there a coach who could meet with my student regularly to help with scheduling and other time management weaknesses?
- **Mentoring.** Is there a mentoring program on campus that will match my student with an upper-class student to help ease the transition to campus?
- **Notetaking.** Are there student note-takers on campus, and if so, is the process anonymous? If there are no student note-takers, are alternative notetaking technologies offered by the college?
- **Advising.** Will my student be able to receive advice on course selection from the Accessibility Service office, signing up for courses that compliment his or her learning style and areas of interest?

Category 3—Comprehensive Learning Support Program

If your student is using significant supports in high school, he or she may need a comprehensive learning support program. A small number of colleges offer these programs, and while they vary from college to college, there are some common characteristics. Most require a separate application to the program, limit the number of students accepted, and are often fee based. However, your student is typically guaranteed regular meetings with a professional learning specialist who can individualize the supports and services needed.

Category 4—Colleges Exclusively for Students with Learning Differences

There are two unique colleges that are exclusively for students who have learning differences, Landmark College in Putney, Vermont, and Beacon College in Leesburg, Florida. These colleges offer summer programs, associate and bachelor degrees, and are often used as a springboard for transferring after consolidating academic skills and building a new academic record.



The main takeaway is that there are many different levels of support and services, and it is important to do your homework and choose the one that is the right fit for your student.

Is your student really ready?

The last tip, and perhaps the most important is to ask yourself, “*Is my student ready for college?*” College is not simply another year of high school, and there are fundamental changes that lie ahead.

According to the ADA, the student, not the college, bears the burden of ensuring that they have the supports and services they need to be successful in college. As a result, students must be **self-aware**, that is, they must know how their ADHD affects them and what strategies or accommodations they can employ to support those aspects that impact their education. In addition, they must know how to **self-advocate**, given that in college Mom or Dad will no longer be around to ensure they receive and take advantage of the supports and services available to them on the college campus.

These added responsibilities are difficult for many students with ADHD; nonetheless, using high school as a dress rehearsal for college can help them achieve some of these essential skills.

We often advise our families to start early in high school and slowly allow the student to assume more responsibility in IEP or accommodations meetings. If they are unsure of how their ADHD impacts their education and why, schedule a meeting with the psychologist who diagnosed the condition to simply explain the strengths and weaknesses found on the evaluation.

Finally, help your student develop motivation and resilience by encouraging them to problem-solve their own way out of a sticky situation. While often our instinct as parents is to jump in and help, small failures are important to growth, and it is helpful if they occur in high school or even earlier. All students will hit an obstacle at some point in college, and we believe that resilience is the silver lining that sometimes comes with the cloud of ADHD.

Finding the “right fit” college can be a complicated process, but knowing what to expect and planning for it can ease the stress and contribute to success in college and beyond. 🎓

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