

COLLEGE PLANNING

For Students With a Learning Disability or Autism Spectrum Disorder: It's So Much More Than Selecting the Right School.

The college planning process can be stressful for just about any high school student. But for students coping with a learning disability (LD) or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the process can seem overwhelming.

Typically, students with LD or ASD are less likely to find success in college than their general education counterparts. The National Center for Special Education Research reports that just 34 percent of learning-disabled students complete a four-year degree within eight years of finishing high school – compared to 56 percent of all students nationally, who the National Student Clearinghouse reports graduate within six years.

Student academic success (or struggle) is the result of a variety of factors, reports “Student Voices,” a national survey of more than 1,200 young adults with learning disabilities conducted by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (N.C.L.D.). The survey found that while academic instruction and support matter, it is less likely to be effective unless it is combined with social-emotional support: 82 percent of respondents who found success post-high school (either in college or the working world) attribute it to their self-confidence and support from parents, teachers and the community at large.

So how can a high school guidance counselor like you help?

Experts including Lucianna Basilice, Ed.D., director of student accessibility services at SJC Long Island, suggest a holistic approach to the college planning process for a student with LD or ASD that goes beyond academic readiness and takes into account building self-determination, self-advocacy, time management and social skills.

Build Critical Self-Advocacy Skills

Easing the transition from family dependence to independence is vital to every student's success, particularly those with LD and ASD, who may be accustomed to parents not only taking care of their daily tasks – but also taking a stand regarding their child's academic rights and accommodations.

Both will be the student's responsibility once they enter into the college realm. Parents often erroneously assume the student's accommodations go with them – or that they can continue to speak up on their behalf.

Help your students learn to be their own self-advocates while still in high school:

- » Make sure the student understands their LD or ASD diagnosis and accommodations.
- » Give them an opportunity to take a more active role in IEP, 504 plans, exit summary and transitioning planning meetings.
- » Work with them to update appropriate accommodations documentation as part of the transition process – and make sure they take copies with them when they graduate.

A Different Set of College Selection Criteria

While many students with LD or ASD are looking for that “real college experience” with newfound freedom and friends, it is important that the school be disability friendly, too. Dr. Basilice recommends students and their counselors:

- » Follow the website “three-click” rule. If it takes more than three clicks from a college’s home page to find their disability services, take that into consideration.
- » Help them explore the accommodations available at the schools to which they are applying. While all U.S. colleges are required by law to have a disabilities office, some offer a more supportive structure than others.
- » Encourage the student to consider a school with a comprehensive learning program. Managed by learning specialists who are trained to work with students who have different learning needs, these programs vary in their breadth and depth – ranging from weekly counselor meetings to reduced course loads and special curricula. (They also vary in fees, which may or may not be eligible for financial aid.)

Encourage Them Not to Go It Alone

A college’s robust disabilities services program will do your student little good if they refuse to use it. And unfortunately, many students with LD or ASD don’t. While 94 percent of high school students with learning disabilities get some kind of help, according to N.C.L.D., only 17 percent of learning-disabled college students do.

For some, it’s a case of 18-year old bravado; for others, it’s simply a question of not having the skill set – or paperwork – to make their case. Here’s where counselors can help:

- » Push them to continue their accommodations in college. At the very least, have them start their post-secondary education with them in place and take it from there.
- » Help compile the proper documentation – most colleges require it. Documentation should provide both evidence of their disability and the need for the accommodations. Check out College Board for test guidelines and suggestions.

- » Look for scholarships for students with special needs. The cost of a college education can be daunting, but students with LD and ASD will find a host of scholarships available just for them.

Perhaps most importantly, be there when they need you with honest advice. Remind them it won’t be easy but that they will come out on top if they work hard, roll with the punches and rely on their college’s services – and their support back home (you included). ◀



RESOURCES

FIND MORE TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES TO HELP STUDENTS WITH LD AND ASD FIND COLLEGE SUCCESS.

“Student Voices: A Study of Students with Learning and Attention Issues,” National Center for Learning Disabilities (nclcd.org).

“Colleges for Students with Asperger’s: The Very Friendly Ones” at CollegeExpress.com.

Guide to Private Special Education by Porter Sargent Publishers.

The College Sourcebook for Students with Learning and Developmental Differences by Midge Lipkin, Ph.D.