

## What University College Presidents Need to Know about College Students with Learning Disabilities

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### ABSTRACT

*Increasing numbers of students with learning disabilities are attending colleges and universities each year. Transitioning from high school to college poses challenges for many students but particularly students with learning disabilities. They move from the secondary school system that provides much oversight and guidance to the college environment that expects them to be more independent and self-regulating. Research in the field offers that college students with learning disabilities who understands how their learning disability influences their learning, self-advocates for services, self-discloses to the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) and meets with their professors are more successful in the college environment. This article will discuss these practices more specifically.*

Students with learning disabilities continue to be the fastest growing at risk population viewing higher education as a postsecondary option. A learning disability is the difference between the student's aptitude and their academic performance. Students with learning disabilities typically encounter difficulty in their listening skills, ability to process information, reading comprehension, writing abilities, spelling skills, and their math aptitude. Although students with learning disabilities continually enroll in colleges and universities, they struggle in their persistence in the college environment. Many students with learning disabilities are unprepared to manage the responsibility of college life. Research about students with learning disabilities in higher education has emphasized some of the barriers that might influence their persistence. Students who practice self-advocacy behaviors, however, are more successful in their navigation of the college culture. Self-advocacy has to do with the student's understanding of their learning disability and ability to value themselves despite their learning disability and to plan for their future. Practicing self-advocacy might help students cope with university obstacles, gain more self-awareness and persist successfully in the university setting.

Disclosing their learning disability is the first step in the student with learning disabilities practice of self-advocating. Disclosing their disability requires that the student understands how their learning disability might influence their performance in their courses. Self-disclosing also requires the student to identify their learning strengths and limitations and is an important

component of the transition from high school to college. Specifically, students with learning disabilities should seek out the Office for Students with Disabilities and request services. Literature in the field suggests that such steps are a shared characteristic of successful students with learning disabilities on college campuses. While in high school, students with learning disabilities are provided services by the educate mandate, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004. IDEIA requires school systems to identify students with learning disabilities, provide them special services and oversee their educational progress through Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) during their entire time in secondary schools. By contrast, when students with learning disabilities transition to college they are no longer provided such extensive services provided by the IDEIA. College students with learning disabilities are entitled to services under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. They take courses in inclusive/traditional classrooms with other college students who do not have learning disabilities and are to compete academically.

College students with learning disabilities are guaranteed services by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. This legislation ensures the civil rights of students with disabilities on college campuses. As a part of that legislation, all colleges and universities (public or private) that receive any type of federal funding are required to have disability services on campus. In order to receive accommodations and or services, students with learning disabilities must disclose their learning disability to the Director/Coordinator of the campus Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD), provide documentation of their learning disability and request specific accommodations. Colleges and universities are obligatory by law to offer “reasonable” accommodations and/or services such as additional time for tests, peer tutors and notes from course lectures. Reasonable accommodations are typically modifications to the responsibilities, environment, or to the way things are usually done that permit students with learning disabilities to have an equal opportunity to participate in and perform the essential functions of an academic program and/or specific courses. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) specifies that colleges and universities are responsible for providing needed accommodations and services when a student discloses a disability. Academic programs and specific courses are required to make reasonable adjustments or modifications to practices, policies, and procedures, and to provide supplementary aids and services for students with learning disabilities, unless to do so would “fundamentally alter” the nature of the programs or results in an “undue burden” to the college or university.

The college or university should not compromise the necessary features of a course or program; nor should accommodations and/or services compromise the academic standards or integrity of a course by providing accommodations. Accommodations and/or services simply provide an additional way to accomplish the course and/or program requirements by removing or minimizing learning disability-related obstacles. Accommodations and/or services should merely provide a level playing field, not an advantage for students with learning disabilities.

Accommodations generally requested by college students with learning disabilities are tutors, note takers and extra time for completing tests. The Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD), the student and course instructors should agree on specific accommodations before exams. Course adjustments might include the use of technology, readers or transcribers. In their transition to college, students with learning disabilities might need to develop many new skills. They will need to effectively communicate and achieve specific goals through self-regulated behavior.

Research focused on students with learning disabilities transitioning to college proposes that in preparation for attending college, students might consider taking a college class while still in high school. Many college and universities have such extensions to pre-college populations. Such opportunities might help students in their decision about the college they would like to attend. Visits to campuses should be as early in their high school career as possible. Key college support services offices and visits with faculty should be a part of the visits. New student orientation programs, first year seminars, and early warning programs are campus outreach efforts that provide additional support for students. These programs can assist students with learning disabilities in developing a sense of belonging, making social connections and setting personal and career goals. Through OSD directors/coordinators, campus Counseling Services counselors, and academic advisers, students can periodically “check-in” with a counselor and/or work on more long-term goals such as career interests.