

# Transition To College

by Anne Reamer

**National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center, Linkages, Spring 1997**

Successful college students with learning disabilities, college advisors, and campus Disability Support Services (DSS) staff agree that developing knowledge about the nature of one's learning disabilities and one's personal and academic strengths and weaknesses is vital for successful transition to postsecondary education. The vehicle for this understanding is professional documentation of the learning disabilities. A qualified professional, such as a school psychologist or educational diagnostician, provides a written diagnosis of the specific learning disability and makes recommendations for accommodations that will help the student meet with academic success. It is essential that each student have a full and frank discussion about this documentation with the expert who has made the assessment.

College-bound students with learning disabilities should make themselves aware of the general categories of postsecondary educational institutions. There are over 3,000 colleges and universities in the United States, varying in size, scope of program offered, setting (urban, suburban, or rural, and residential or commuter), and cost of attendance.

Open admissions colleges admit anyone over age 18 or with a high school diploma and may be two-year or four-year programs. Applicants to selective admissions colleges must meet the criteria set by each school.

Adults with learning disabilities need to have an accurate idea of the strengths they have to offer colleges as well as the academic requirements and admission procedures of the institutions to which they plan to apply. Colleges and universities may not require disclosure of disabilities in the admissions process. However, students who decide to disclose their disability should begin the college application process as early as possible to allow the school adequate time to review the documentation of the learning disabilities and to plan for the necessary accommodative services.

The disclosure of a learning disability may not be used by colleges and universities as a basis for denying admission. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, P.L. 93-112 (especially Section 504), and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), P.L. 101-336, protect the civil rights of people with disabilities and require postsecondary institutions to provide reasonable, timely, and effective accommodative services. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), P.L. 93-380, protects the confidentiality of student records. Disability-related information should be kept in separate, single-source files with access limited to appropriate personnel.

Once in college, the student holds the responsibility for self-identification and self-advocacy. To be a self-advocate, each student must learn to understand his or her particular type of learning disability, the resultant academic strengths and weaknesses, and his or her individual learning style. Most importantly, persons with learning disabilities need to become comfortable describing to others both the disability and their academic needs.

Hundreds of colleges and universities have comprehensive programs especially designed for students with learning disabilities. Staffed by trained professionals, these programs offer services beyond those required by law for making programs accessible. Many colleges and universities levy additional charges above the tuition fee for these supplementary services, but accommodations required under Section 504 and ADA are provided at no cost. Students who wish to learn more about such programs should either contact the colleges and universities in which they are

interested or check one of the many college guidebooks that contain listings of, and information about, such programs.

Accommodative services are essential to the success of many students with learning disabilities who may also benefit from mini-courses in study skills, assertiveness training, and time management. Students should try out various accommodations that have proven successful to others, among which are included:

- listening to a tape recording of written material while reading it;
- using extended time to complete exams (usually time and a half);
- using a computer to write exams or papers; and
- taking the exam in a quiet place.

Colleges and universities are not required to alter admissions requirements, nor are they required to alter programmatic requirements for students with learning disabilities once they have been admitted. If the course in question is found to be an essential element to the student's course of study or degree, it is unlikely that a waiver or a substitution will be granted. Accommodative services are not to be used in a way that would lower established academic standards.

The following tips may aid adults with learning disabilities as they prepare for college:

- Consider internships, part-time jobs, or volunteer service that will develop necessary skills.
- Consider enrolling in a summer pre-college program designed for students with learning disabilities, which may be available at a community college.
- Visit campuses, preferably while classes are in session, or talk by telephone with the staff of the Disability Support Services Office or the learning disabilities program to get an impression of campus daily life.
- Contact the local Vocational Rehabilitation agency, which may offer a variety of services to eligible students with learning disabilities, including vocational assessment, tuition assistance, or testing services.
- Explore sources of financing the college education. Although there is little scholarship money specifically for students with learning disabilities, readers are encouraged to review the HEATH resource paper, *Financial Aid for Students with Disabilities*.
- Join one of the national organizations that provide support not only to adults with learning disabilities but also to professionals. Participation in these organizations is an excellent way to build confidence, increase disability awareness and disability-related knowledge, and get information about special programs and resources.

Increasing numbers of people with learning disabilities are enrolling in colleges and universities. Since 1985, among first-time, full-time freshmen who reported having any disability, the percentage of those with learning disabilities has doubled from 15 percent to 32 percent.

Awareness of one's strengths, advocacy skills, and persistence are among the most important tools for building a future through education. People with learning disabilities may maximize their chances of success by getting appropriate support, continually assessing their growth, and carefully planning their future. Anyone with learning disabilities who is considering college should be encouraged to pursue this goal.

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