

Nine Strategies to Improve College Transition Planning for Students With Disabilities

Elizabeth C. Hamblet

Research shows that many students with learning disabilities (LD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) who attend college do not complete their degrees at the same rate as their typical peers. Part of the explanation for this is due to a major difference in the education environment; in college, both the disability accommodation system and the academic environment are different from what students have experienced in high school. However, high schools can prepare students for this postsecondary transition by educating them about the college disability system and academic expectations, and by helping them develop knowledge about their learning profile and compensatory strategies; this in turn can improve outcomes for these students. This article provides nine strategies to assist districts in creating a comprehensive plan to help students with LD and ADHD make a successful transition to college.

In the decades since laws were enacted to protect their rights within the educational system, the number of students with disabilities who enroll each year in college has increased (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Data from a longitudinal study in 2011 examining students with disabilities' post-high-school outcomes indicated that 15.5% of those who enrolled at 4-year institutions were identified as having LD. ADHD was not listed as a disability category, but it may have been included in the 19.5%

of students who were identified as having "other health impairments" (Sanford et al., 2011). Despite enrolling, once they start to attend, students with disabilities do not keep pace with their peers without disabilities in relation to earning their degrees. Sanford and col-

leagues found that within 6 years of completing high school, only 29.4% of students with disabilities had completed college, as compared to 42.2% of students in the general population. Within 8 years, the percentage rises to 34.2% for students with disabilities



(with no specific information about differences by disability category), and 51.2% for students without disabilities (Newman et al., 2011).

Although most current research does not provide specific information about degree completion rates for students with LD and ADHD, researchers (e.g., Hadley, 2007; Skinner, 2004) have enumerated the difficulties that impede student progress in the traditional 4-year college environment. This setting typically places higher demands on students than the high school environment: College students have to keep up with voluminous reading loads, stay focused through long lectures, and often prepare for the two exams or compose the two papers that constitute their entire grade for a semester—all typically without the structure or supports commonly provided in high schools (Hamblet, 2011). Within this environment, college students with LD have reported the following difficulties (see Hadley, 2007; Skinner, 2004):

- Feeling overloaded with work.
- Prioritizing/knowing where to begin assignments.
- The amount of writing and standards for their writing.
- The lack of regular assignments and feedback.
- Study skills.
- Test taking and preparation.
- Note taking.
- Listening comprehension.
- Organization.
- Reading.

Students with ADHD have reported that they struggle because of deficits in their organizational skills, academic coping strategies, executive functions, and focusing and sustaining attention (Norvilitis, Sun, & Zhang, 2010). Although most students (with and without disabilities) have to make adjustments when they get to college, these new challenges may affect students with LD and ADHD more than others because their disabilities affect learning, concentration, and planning—all of which are critical to success in this new academic environment.

Another academic shift that students with LD and ADHD face is the changes in the disability service system at the postsecondary level. Students who enroll at college do not automatically receive accommodations for their disability because the services provided in postsecondary environments are governed by different federal laws and regulations than in elementary and secondary settings (i.e., Subsection E of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans With Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 vs. Subsection D of Section 504 and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act; Wolanin & Steele, 2004).

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In postsecondary education, students must apply for and request accommodations on their own, and provide documentation that they have a disability, in order to receive the accommodations that provide them equal access (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). If students do not apply for accommodations upon commencing college, any bad grades that they receive on an assignment or exam will not be expunged if they are later found eligible for support services (Hamblet, 2011). Because colleges have different requirements for the paperwork students have to submit, some students will find that the documentation their high school provides is not considered sufficient (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). When students' documentation is found wanting, typically the issue is that their testing reports do not meet the colleges' guidelines (e.g., missing a cognitive or achievement battery or does not include all tests that comprise a standard battery), or the evaluation was conducted too long ago to be considered an accurate reflection of the

student's current level of functioning. Students whose documentation is deemed unacceptable at college will have to pay for what they need on their own, which can be costly (Hamblet, 2011). Students who cannot afford such testing typically have to try to get through college without accommodations for their LD or ADHD (Wolanin & Steele, 2004).

If a student's documentation is found acceptable and the student is approved for services, colleges generally will provide basic accommodations such as extended time on exams and access to texts in electronic format. Because laws governing services at the postsecondary level allow colleges to reject accommodations that create a fundamental alteration to school requirements or entail providing a personal service or aid (28 C.F.R. § 35.130[b][7] and 28 C.F.R. § 39.160[a][1][ii]), students who request more significant accommodations may have their requests denied (see box, "Understanding the Limits of Reasonable Accommodations").

There is much that high school individualized education program (IEP) teams and special education faculty and staff members can do to give students the preparation they need to be successful at college. Adequately preparing students with LD and ADHD for the postsecondary environment can increase the probability of their success (Lightner, Kipps-Vaughan, Schulte, & Trice 2012).

#1 Educate IEP Team Members and Special Education Faculty

In order to be able to educate students with disabilities about the legal and systematic changes at college, high school special education teachers and IEP team members have to be knowledgeable themselves (Lightner et al., 2012). An effective way to bridge this knowledge gap is to arrange a professional "field trip" to the disability services (DS) office of a local college, where members of the special education staff and faculty can learn from the DS director or a coordinator about the college's procedures for applying for accommodations, and review forms

Understanding the Limits of Reasonable Accommodations

In college, students with LD or ADHD . . .

- Might not be allowed to use calculators or spellcheckers on exams in certain classes, depending upon the skill being measured (Madaus, 2009).
- Might not receive waivers or substitutions for courses that represent a serious challenge for them (even as a result of their disability), if the course is required for their major or concentration (Madaus, 2009).
- Might be required to pass math, foreign language, or other courses in order to graduate—even if their disability makes it very difficult or impossible for them to do so—if they are considered a core requirement at their college (Madaus, 2009).
- May find that specialized tutoring—such as one-on-one assistance or the opportunity to work with someone trained in learning disabilities—is not available (Hamblet, 2011).

or applications students are required to complete. Disability services staff should discuss what accommodations are commonly granted (and those that are not likely to be approved), and should introduce and demonstrate technology tools and software available to support students. A tour of the DS testing rooms, or information about where accommodated testing takes place, will help staff visualize the process as well as enable them to describe it to their students. Although it is important to note that services and policies vary from college to college, such a tour and discussion will be invaluable in ensuring that secondary educators and IEP case managers have a sense of the environment to which students will be transitioning.

#2 Reach Out to Families

Although some families may be familiar with the disability services system at college, others may make inaccurate assumptions. Families need to know that basic disability accommodations and services are available and are free at every college, so they can encourage students to work toward the goal of attending college. Because colleges do not have separate admission requirements for students with disabilities, high school students with LD and ADHD need to take the courses that meet college entrance requirements (Madaus, 2009). Parents, students, and teachers also need to understand what limitations may be placed on accom-

modations in order to ensure that the student is progressing toward the level of independence needed for the rigors of college (Banerjee & Brinckerhoff, 2009). In addition, families need to understand the benefits of applying for disability support services; students who follow their parents' encouragement to apply for accommodations at the start of their college career achieve higher GPAs (Lightner et al., 2012). This finding alone emphasizes the importance of supports to students' success at college, and why high schools need to ensure that families understand the college accommodation system.

An effective way to educate families is to arrange for a presentation by a local college's DS staff, and invite some students who have graduated to come and speak or answer questions as part of a panel. Putting families in direct contact with both students and staff at the college level will give them a chance to ask questions that special education faculty and IEP team members may not be able to answer. Though high school staff may have the knowledge needed to respond to parents' and students' questions, families may take information more seriously when it comes directly from those working or studying at the college level.

An ideal time to begin educating students and parents about transition is during the student's eighth-grade IEP meeting, when teams make course and

accommodation selections for freshman year. Even if the school has presented a transition night like the one described, not all families may have been able to attend, and this offers another opportunity to explicitly discuss the DS system. At this meeting, it also would be helpful to review and provide families with the U.S. Department of Education's pamphlets on students' rights (2011) and the availability of auxiliary aids (1998).

Educating students and their parents about the postsecondary environment is a crucial element in transition programming, and there should be ongoing efforts to educate families about the college environment and services. Schools can send occasional mass e-mails to connect families with information on transition by providing links to Internet resources that discuss the difference between high school and college or other helpful Internet resources (e.g., George Washington University's Heath Resource Center, <http://www.heath.gwu.edu>; Jarrow, n.d.; My Future My Plan, <http://www.stateart.com/works.php?workId=47&i=2>).

#3 Encourage Students' Future Independence

All college students are responsible for their own learning, and some of the supports that students with LD and ADHD use in high school may not be available. Governing federal law does not require colleges to provide every accommodation students have previously received, and some of the adjustments high schools provide may be considered fundamental alterations or personal services. When a student with LD and ADHD is first adjusting to the demands of high school as a freshman, it may be appropriate to provide a certain level of support. However, as the student progresses through high school the IEP team (including the student and family) should consider reducing the number of accommodations and modifications or eliminating those less likely to be available in college. Paring down supports can give students a sense of how they might perform in the college environment, where servic-

Table 1. Supporting Students' Future Independence

High School Accommodation	Preparing Students for College Expectations
Study guides provided by teachers	Train students to create their own study guides.
Spelling mistakes in writing assignments and tests ignored or not counted	Teach students to use hand-held spellcheckers on tests and word processing spell-check feature for homework.
Teacher or aide explains test questions	Provide instruction in test-taking strategies (e.g., underlining key words, rephrasing confusing questions as statements).
Modification of assignment length	Improve student's writing skills so they meet expectations.
Extension of deadlines for papers and projects	Help students develop time management skills (e.g., breaking big assignments into smaller pieces, setting interim deadlines for each step in the writing process).
Teacher or aide prompts student to pay attention	Encourage students to sit near front of class; teach them to use technology tools that prompt for refocusing (e.g., buzzing watch).

es tend to be more limited. Table 1 presents suggestions for helping students who currently utilize accommodations that may not be available to them at college to transition to independent learning. Before adjusting or removing accommodations, it is essential to teach students compensatory techniques so that they will be ready to function successfully without them (Banerjee & Brinckerhoff, 2009).

#4 Teach Students to Use Assistive Technology

Because federal law does not require colleges to provide personal services, students will find that they need to be ready to function independently on a variety of academic tasks. In order to help them, colleges typically offer students the use of various technology supports. Teaching students to use technology while they are in high school may improve the chances that they will use them effectively in college (see Table 2).

As part of the interaction with local colleges' DS offices, high school personnel can learn about different types

of assistive technology typically available. The school district's technology coordinator should work with high school personnel to identify appropriate products for students and determine whether any of the companies with which the district already deals offer appropriate technology and free demonstrations. Another question to ask the technology coordinator is whether the state or county has an assistive technology center to help match students with devices or programs. If it is possible to arrange for product demonstrations, this would greatly benefit students and their families in planning for this transition.

#5 Give Students the Documentation They Need

Many colleges will not consider accommodation requests based on documentation that contains testing that is more than 3 years old. The best way for IEP teams to make sure that students' documentation is accepted by their colleges is to test students at some point during their high school years—and later is better, especially as

some schools require students be tested with the adult versions of assessments. Optimally, such testing should include a complete cognitive and achievement battery, and results should be presented in standard scores and percentile ranks (some colleges require these but do not require grade and age equivalents).

Students with LD or ADHD and their parents should be aware, too, that documentation requirements vary widely across colleges. Whereas some postsecondary institutions require very little information, others require full psychoeducational or neuropsychological evaluations—which school districts are unlikely to be able to provide. Families should be advised not to pursue any private testing, however, until students have made a decision about where they will enroll, as it might prove to be unnecessary. If students cannot get their evaluations completed in time for the start of school, they can ask their college for temporary accommodations until their report is complete. High schools also can support students and their families by identifying local universities that provide testing at a reduced cost as part of their psychology training programs; a member of the IEP team or school special education staff could be assigned to compile a list of such programs.

If district policy does not allow testing for all students at some point while they are in high school, the IEP team should make sure that the Summary of Performance (SOP) they create is as detailed as possible and contains both subjective and objective information to help create a picture of the student's learning profile and needs. A model for an effective SOP document was created in 2005 and has been endorsed by the Learning Disabilities Association of America (see http://www.ldanatl.org/aboutld/adults/post_secondary/sop.asp). Even if districts do not use the template, it provides some direction as to the kind of information a SOP should contain. The SOP should provide a historical overview of the student's need for and use of accommodations, including:

Table 2. Technology Tools for Students With Disabilities

Area of Difficulty	High School Accommodation	Technology Solution
Reading	Teacher or parent reads text aloud; reduction in reading assignments	Text-to-speech software (e.g., Wynn, Kurzweil, Read and Write Gold, online or built-in screen readers)
Composing papers	Teacher or parent serves as scribe as student dictates, assists in organizing ideas	Speech-to-text software (e.g., Dragon NaturallySpeaking), graphic organizer software (e.g., Inspiration)
Note taking	Teacher or aide provides notes	Digital recording devices (e.g., Smartpen) for lectures, electronic templates to organize notes
Exam preparation	Teacher or aide creates study guide	Sites or applications students can use to create their own flash cards (e.g., http://www.gflashcards.com , quizlet.com)

- Why the student was in need of special education.
- How the disability substantially limits learning.
- What services and accommodations the student has received over the years and how these have helped to compensate for the student’s particular disability (Sitlington & Payne, 2004).

Because DS staff members are not always trained in working with students with LD or ADHD, it is helpful if the SOP explicates the link between the accommodations recommended in testing reports and the student’s particular area of weakness. Providing all of these details in the SOP—in the absence of thorough, recent psychoeducational testing—may improve the likelihood that students receive their desired accommodations.

#6 Educate Students About Their Disabilities and Strengths

Because students have to ask for accommodations when they get to college, they must be aware of both their areas of need and their strengths. Students will need this knowledge in order to know how to best approach their work at college, to be able to apply for accommodations, and to make appropriate choices when they do so.

Research supports the importance of educating students about their learning profile. Trammell (2003), whose investigation showed that students who requested and utilized the most accom-

modations had the lowest GPAs, hypothesized that these students did not understand their learning profiles well and chose inappropriate adjustments to fit their specific needs. Lightner and colleagues (2012) found that when students asked for accommodations later in their college careers (rather than upon first entering), they did so because they had earned low grades without them. The reasons these students gave for waiting included a lack of understanding about what kinds of services DS could offer, how they could apply, and how their disability would affect them in the college academic environment.

Students may be better prepared to make good decisions with regard to accommodations once they get to college if they are educated about their profile of learning strengths and weaknesses, are encouraged to try out different accommodations, and understand the changes in the academic environment that may affect them because of their LD or ADHD. Students can complete learning inventories (e.g., Bremen High School, 2011; Weinstein & Palmer, 2006) as a strategy to start thinking about how they learn best and engage in a realistic assessment of the areas in which they may need to build their skills.

One effective way to ensure that students are engaged in thinking about their learning profiles and their accommodations is to have students lead their own IEP meetings rather than be passive participants (Lightner et al., 2012). Although this may be an uncomfortable idea for some students,

IEP teams can help students by scaffolding this experience; materials to help guide this process are available on the Internet (e.g., Hawbaker, 2007). Having students identify the accommodations they find helpful and those they do not and asking them to respond to teacher feedback on their academic performance will help them build the self-awareness and self-monitoring skills needed for success in college and future careers.

#7 Explicitly Teach Learning and Organizational Strategies

Students with LD and ADHD struggle with a variety of academic tasks at college, but they can benefit from using strategies to help with note taking, test preparation, time management, written expression, reading, and tracking assignments. Students should receive direct instruction in techniques that they can apply across a variety of courses and can utilize independently (Deshler et al., 2008/2009). Teachers should utilize direct teaching, modeling, and guided practice, as well as a variety of different approaches to reach different types of learning styles (Deshler et al., 2008/2009). Teaching students strategies for reading, writing, test taking, note taking, and time management (see, e.g., the Learning Toolbox, <http://coe.jmu.edu/Learningtoolbox/s2top.html>; Sweet Briar’s Academic Resource Center, <http://www.arc.sbc.edu/index.html>) can help prepare them to function independently at college.

#8 Ensure That Students Are Prepared to Apply for Accommodations at College

Students with LD and ADHD need to know how to apply for accommodations when they get to college. So that students are effectively prepared to self-advocate, any transition program must ensure that students are aware of and understand the tests diagnosing their learning challenges, help students develop a list of helpful accommodations, and teach students how to apply for accommodations.

Students should meet with their case manager, advisor, counselor, or transition specialist in their senior year to review the types of testing used to determine their eligibility and discuss relevant scores. This will provide students with an understanding of why they were eligible for services and their specific areas of need or challenge. (It may be helpful to have the school psychologist who performed the testing lead this conversation.) Before they graduate, students should be able to explain, for example, “Because I have an auditory processing disorder, I sometimes struggle to keep up with lectures, and I would benefit from the use of a Smartpen so that I can fill in the holes in my notes.”

Likewise, during senior year, students should be supported in developing a list of desired accommodations. Students should be able to explain to someone else what their disability is, how it affects their academic functioning, and how their requested accommodations will prevent their disability from denying them appropriate access to college programs (i.e., classes). Students should know it is appropriate to ask for accommodations in college that they have not used before; they just have to be able to explain which aspects of the college environment (e.g., long, fast-moving lectures) require them to utilize accommodations they did not find necessary in high school. A student who is able to make such a request and explain it thoroughly demonstrates to the college’s DS office an understanding of the postsecondary environment and preparation for it.

Toward the end of a student’s senior year, the student (along with a case manager, transition specialist, or counselor) should review the information available on the web site for the DS office at the college the student plans

Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (Kravets & Wax, 2012) and *Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities or AD/HD* (Peterson’s, 2007). Case managers also should emphasize that if students wait to apply for accommoda-

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to attend. Students need to know the name of the DS office, where it is located on campus, and the process for applying for accommodations. If staff cannot spend time with students reviewing this information, schools should identify another way to notify students that they must contact DS at their college to request accommodations and may have to complete an application, meet with a staff member, submit documentation, and so on. This is a topic that can be discussed by a college student or DS director during a transition night (see #2). Having a simple handout that outlines the procedures at a local college, as an example, also will help students understand the overall process. Students should be aware that individual colleges’ procedures may differ, and that they should call their college’s DS office to ask questions if they find the process confusing. One critical point to make in these discussions and to include in any handouts for students is that if they are found eligible, students have a right to accommodations and that colleges must provide basic accommodations free of charge (e.g., conversion of the texts students have purchased to PDFs so that they can be used with a screen-reading program, extended time on exams). However, students who seek certain kinds of support (e.g., meeting several times a week with an LD specialist) will likely have to locate a fee-based program. These programs are not widely available, but students can locate schools that offer them through guides such as *The K&W Guide to College Programs & Services for Students With Learning Disabilities or*

tions, any low grades they earn will stay on their transcript.

#9 Create a Districtwide Transition Program

If districts want to provide students with LD and ADHD their best chance of success in college, implementation of the strategies suggested in this article cannot be left to chance. Instead, districts should develop a plan for when each of the activities described will take place during a student’s high school years so that none will be omitted (see Banerjee & Brinckerhoff, 2009), and they should designate which staff or faculty members or administrators will be responsible for implementing each strategy (Deshler et al., 2008/2009). Special education directors or supervisors can set up a timeline (i.e., activities that should take place during students’ freshman year, sophomore year, etc.) and assign responsibility to the appropriate staff or faculty member. Once the plan is set, the director should meet with all involved staff and faculty members together so that the plan can be reviewed and discussed and all stakeholders know their role.

Implementing a cohesive, comprehensive transition plan requires four major elements: time, space, personnel, and appropriate training. In order to effectively teach strategies, special education teachers and paraprofessionals need to work with students one-on-one, on a regular basis, in a space outside of the general education classroom (Deshler et al., 2008/2009). Because some special educators’ positions require them to co-teach in the

general education setting, creating a system that allows them time to work with students outside of that setting to teach them learning strategies like those described here may require either a change in responsibilities or hiring additional personnel. It also requires the allocation of space and regularly scheduled, frequent periods of students' time in school (Deshler et al., 2008/2009). Creating such a setting and regular time with students will provide an appropriate time and place for the less-frequent activities to take place (e.g., teaching students how to apply for accommodations).

What may be the most important consideration for the implementation of a successful program is the inclusion of relevant professional development activities. Adults who will work with students need rigorous training in strategy instruction so that they are ready to teach students both the techniques needed to be successful at college (Deshler et al., 2008/2009) and how to use technology tools. Administrators will have to place a priority on making sure that special education faculty and paraprofessionals receive the instruction they will need in order to help students successfully handle academic challenges on their own.

Conclusion

Preparing students with LD and ADHD for success at college requires a focused effort by everyone involved, most importantly the student. A districtwide transition program that includes all of the strategies suggested in this article, and that is in place throughout the course of students' middle and high school education, will help to guarantee that students with disabilities enter college with the skills, documentation, and strategies they need to achieve success.

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Elizabeth C. Hamblet (New Jersey CEC), Learning Specialist, Columbia University, New York, New York.

Address correspondence regarding this article to echamblet@LDadvisory.com.

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