

# LEARNING DISABILITIES: HOW TO SUCCEED IN COLLEGE FROM DAY ONE

STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES CAN LEARN MUCH FROM THIS FORMER COLLEGE PRESIDENT. HE OVERCAME HIS OWN ACADEMIC STRUGGLES AND OFFERS HELP FOR COLLEGE-BOUND STUDENTS.

When I left home for a Midwestern college many moons ago, I was a shipwreck waiting to happen. In high school I was such a slow reader that I could never complete the SATs and as a result my scores were embarrassingly low. My grades, too, were mediocre and the only reason I got into a good college was because of a persuasive high school guidance counselor.



At my college, I struggled with assignments. One of my teachers told me he didn't think I was very bright and was surprised that the college had admitted me. In those days little was known about learning disabilities and there were very few resources for students like me. And so at the end of my first year I considered of dropping out of college.

I eventually transferred to a college closer to home and by sheer good fortune took an introductory sociology course taught by a professor who noticed that, while I was always behind with reading assignments, my observational and communication skills were still pretty good. This professor also knew little about learning disabilities but could see that I wasn't stupid and took me under his wing. By the end of sophomore year, my grades were improving and at graduation I had done well

enough to get into graduate school. I eventually ended up getting a PhD and teaching college history before going on to become a college president.

Today, in retirement, I volunteer at the high school I graduated from doing mock college interviews with rising juniors and seniors. And when I do this I often meet students who are struggling with a learning disability. Nationally, [3.3% of all students who head off to college each year](#) (or about 40,000 students going to a four-year college or university) report having a learning disability, usually ADHD, dyslexia, or some kind of a processing disorder.

I tell these students not to be ashamed of their disability, that learning disabilities usually don't go away and consequently in school and in college they will probably have to work harder than their classmates, but that at the end of the day they will have developed a work ethic that will serve them well later in life. Many very successful people—corporate CEOs, famous trial lawyers, university presidents—struggle with a learning disability.

This message is helpful to the students I work with and gives them hope and encouragement. Unfortunately I don't always have the same opportunity to talk to their parents. So, in this essay I would like to share some thoughts with them:

## How Students with Learning Disabilities Can Succeed in College and How Parents Can Support Them

### 1. Getting Accommodation for Learning Disabilities

Unlike my days as a student, most colleges and universities now have an Office of Disability Services (ODS) that can provide your child with support and what we call “accommodation.” Depending on the learning disability accommodation might mean untimed tests, preferential seating, exemptions from certain graduation requirements, the ability to tape lectures, or no oral quizzes. But getting accommodation does not happen automatically

Many parents think if their child received accommodation and support services in high school they will automatically get them in college. Not so. Students with a learning disability must submit to the college's ODS documentation of their disability (usually from a health care professional like a psychologist or a physician) with a recommendation on what accommodations the student should receive. Someone from the ODS will then meet with the student, go over the accommodation the college will offer, and then share this information with the professors who are required by law to provide the accommodation mandated.

### 2. Students With Learning Disabilities Cannot be Discriminated Against

In interviewing people for my recent book [Off to College: A Guide for Parents \(Chicago Guides to Academic Life\)](#), University of Chicago Press. Joanne Long, former dean of freshmen at Vassar College, told me that it is imperative for students with a learning disability (and who wish to receive accommodation) to identify themselves soon after they are admitted but well before they arrive on campus for orientation.

Karmen Ten Naples, Dean of Students at Morningside College in Iowa and an expert on learning disabilities, goes even further. Pointing out that by law (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act) colleges cannot discriminate against students with a disability even in the application process, she encourages these students and their parents to meet with the ODS (most colleges have them though perhaps with a different name) before making formal application. Not all colleges are created equal: programs to support and accommodate students with learning disabilities vary widely, even within the confines of the law. Better to know beforehand whether or not the college can provide adequate support for your child. Indeed, this is no different from shopping for mortgage rates or for automobiles. Ask different colleges the same questions and you will sometimes get very different answers. Parents need to be smart consumers.

Again, if you decide to visit the ODS before or during the application process no one in the admissions office will know unless you ask that your information to be shared with them.

### 3. No Need to be Concerned About Revealing a Learning Disability

Many high school students I work with express concern that if they reveal their disability to the college and then receive accommodation, they might feel embarrassed by being singled out. In fact when a disability is revealed to the ODS and (in arranging accommodation) shared with a professor, this information is considered confidential. Moreover, unlike high school, most colleges do not have separate classes for special needs students so there is no visual way to know who has a learning disability and who doesn't as often happens in high school.

Finally, college students I interviewed for my book told me that when they voluntarily tell classmates about their learning disability, nobody seems to care. Indeed, we have lots of normalization data showing that it's "safer" today to be identified as having a learning disability than once was the case.

Frankly, there is no reason not to get accommodation if it is offered.

### 4. Let Go

In secondary school, most parents actively advocate for their children who have a disability. But in college, their teen must learn how to do this for themselves. This can be a singular challenge. Karmen Ten Naples says she sees two kinds of parents whose children have a learning disability, those who are helpful and those who are not. Helpful parents are the ones who provide the college with useful information about how their children have learned or not learned in high school and then let the professionals at college do their job. By contrast, unhelpful parents get improperly involved in their college student's life. For example, when their child doesn't do well on an exam, they often call the president's office or they email the professor instead of calling the ODS, doing their child no favor.

Far better for the student, with the help of the ODS, to advocate for themselves. As Dr. Jack Trammell, Director of Disability Support Services at Randolph-Macon College points out, if students with a learning disability understand and accept their own disability and learn how to communicate effectively about it in appropriate situations, they will be much more likely to succeed in life.

If your student has a learning disability, the provision of accommodation will provide a level playing field and help make their college experience more productive and enjoyable. Moreover, most colleges have support services that will help all students to succeed, whether or not they have a learning disability. So, in addition to providing your student with love and encouragement, advise them to have regular contact with their advocate in the ODS, to take advantage of the college Writing Center and other academic support services, and to regularly see their academic advisor.

I just wish I had these services when I went to college!

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