

Paving the Way to College Success for Students with Disabilities

Learning to be a Self-Advocate

More and more students with disabilities are demonstrating success in high school and exploring options for higher education. As a parent, you may wonder if your student is ready for the transition to college and how you can help her prepare for the inevitable changes to come. Behind every successful student with physical or mental disabilities, you will invariably find strong parents who have acted as primary advocates for their child over the years — painstakingly learning the ins and outs of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), attending IEP meetings, and keeping communication open with teachers and counselors. The question becomes, “Where is the student in the equation?” In college, students will be responsible for taking on the role of self-advocate, but many wait until after graduation to develop this skill. Parents, acting as advocate role models, should slowly relinquish control of the process to students as they become juniors and seniors in high school — self-advocacy should start in high school.

Here are three steps that can help pave the way for your student’s academic success:

Learn to articulate needs: Discuss your student’s learning differences and/or disabilities with her to be sure she really understands how these differences affect her learning. It has likely been years since you first realized your child’s disabilities, and perhaps you haven’t taken an opportunity to discuss it with her as a young adult. Oftentimes students have a very superficial understanding of their disability. Can your student accurately describe her learning challenges, learning strengths, and learning styles? In college, your teen will need to be able to articulate her needs in a very specific manner both in written and verbal forms.

Become skilled at requesting assistance: Students with physical disabilities, learning disabilities like ADD, or ADHD, or mental illnesses like anxiety and depression, often struggle in high school as they learn to develop habits, routines, and accommodations that allow them to be successful. Once students find their personal formula for success, it is often left behind when transitioning to college. Your teen should be encouraged to attend and actively participate in IEP or 504 PLAN meetings as well as any transition meetings to begin to learn terminology and communication skills. The burden to request services will shift to the student in college. Persuade your student to become adept at discussing her needs with high school teachers and directly asking for the assistance that she requires for continued success. Your daughter will discover that it is best to talk with teachers at the beginning of the school year, BEFORE she is in a challenging or confrontational situation.

Explore college options: Visit college disability offices when taking campus tours; you will find that services will vary widely from one school to the next. A strong support team should be a key criterion in your student's college search. Ask your student to make an appointment to meet with the counselor alone to discuss the services offered at each university. It may be awkward for your child to meet with a stranger to discuss special needs without you for support. This is normal. Your teen must understand the process and expect to navigate it on his own; many colleges do not let parents make accommodation requests for their children. You can support your teen by role playing prior to the visit and by assuring her that the counselor has met with hundreds of teens with all kinds of disabilities.

The development of self-advocacy skills is essential to the academic and social success of students beyond high school. It is a tough skill to learn while adjusting to the myriad of social changes that college brings with it. As difficult as it may be to relinquish this control, you will be paving the way for his or her future academic success by assisting your student in developing this critical skill in high school.