

Post Secondary Education

Successful Transition to Adult Life: Preparing for and Navigating College

By Crystal Reed, M.A., College Counselor for Students with Special Needs

While handing out diplomas at our local high school last week, I was struck by the contrast between the enthusiasm most of the students had for launching into the adult world and the ambivalence and trepidation I see in the college-bound kids with disabilities or special needs that I've been working with for the past 18 years.

Leaving the familiar safety of high school and entering the grown-up world of the workforce or higher education can be stressful, especially for those who have relied so heavily on the codified and wide-reaching net of special education. All students experience tremendous growth in the years following graduation, so we should not expect those who also have learning, emotional, attentional, or autism spectrum issues—which often cause lags in social/emotional development—to make absolute decisions while still in high school. That is often too early to commit to long-term educational plans.

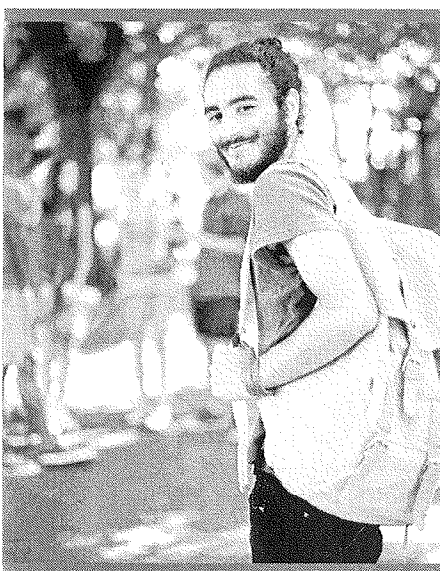
The real goal of their transition planning should be to build skills and find the “right next step.” We want to enroll these students in programs where they can start establishing track records of success. Appropriate opportunities will develop naturally as a product of positive results.

Finding the Right Next Step

There are many elements to consider when evaluating the fit of any educational program after high school. Does the school teach a subject (major) of interest? Are the student's GPA and test scores a good match for the school profile? Can the family afford it? Does the school offer

the right types of support? Does it have the kinds of extracurricular activities that will keep the young person productively occupied and feeling connected? Even weather, dorms, and dining options warrant consideration.

These are all important questions. But most importantly we need to ask: Is the student actually ready to take on this particular challenge?



The student's level of self-awareness is of critical importance in this process. None of us can find the right path for ourselves if we aren't genuinely aware of what we want and need, of our own strengths and weaknesses. When considering education after high school, students with disabilities need to have moved beyond any denial of their disability so they can accept the need for support as part of their planning.

Self-acceptance doesn't happen overnight; it often takes a long-term, concerted effort by the family, school,

and service providers. But while it is sometimes frustrating and difficult, self-acceptance is absolutely essential if these young people are to lead happy, productive, reasonably independent adult lives.

Preparing

In addition to the obvious component of academic preparation (fulfilling college eligibility requirements, taking increasingly rigorous coursework, etc.), there are other keys to helping students prepare for the transition to college.

According to the Landmark College Institute for Research and Training, a leading organization for research on college students with learning differences, the most important skills students must possess in order to be successful in college are

- executive functioning skills,
- self-advocacy skills, and
- strong, independent work habits.

In fact, their research shows that academic ability only minimally impacts a student's statistical chances of persevering in college. Granted, students with weaker academic skills may take longer to complete their program, but in terms of staying in college and progressing through a course of study, independence-related skills were infinitely more important.

Our job as parents and educators is to support all of our students in becoming the most capable and responsible young adults possible. We don't do this by clearing obstacles from a child's path but by teaching increasingly sophisticated methods and strategies for independently

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managing, overcoming, and tolerating those obstacles that will inevitably arise. This should be a primary focus across curricula and in the home in order to raise students who are ready to enter higher education or the workforce after high school.

My students confirm this from their experiences. Number one on their wish list of things that schools and parents should have done differently was to have placed more emphasis on helping them become independent; to learn to handle the challenges that they quickly came to face, largely unprepared, in the post-high-school world.

(Number two, if you're interested, was for adults to realize that college isn't for everybody and to be more supportive of students finding a productive alternative, if that is their choice.)

In addition, we need to teach students the differences between high school and college. Many things we might consider obvious or trivial can throw first-year college students off kilter and interfere with their successful transition. When I talk about these things with high school students with disabilities (and even with some general education students), they frequently react with surprise to each and every item. Some examples:

- There is no curfew in a dorm and nobody makes you go to class.
- There will be no bells to signal the beginning or end of class.
- You generally don't go to each of your classes every day.
- You have to buy all of your own books and supplies.
- In most cases, no one will ask if you need help; you must seek out help yourself.
- Your parents cannot talk to your professors on your behalf.

- Your grade is often based only on tests, not on homework.

You get the idea. The list of small-but-important things you can teach students is almost endless.

In most cases, no one will ask if you need help; you must seek out help yourself.

Help in College, Part 1

Students with a documented disability should sign up with the disability services office at their school of enrollment well before their first semester starts. (All colleges receiving federal funds are required to provide reasonable accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act—ADA—and Section 504, an amendment to the Workforce Rehabilitation Act.) Even if the student never needs classroom accommodations, there are usually other benefits of being a client, such as priority enrollment and decreased course load thresholds for financial aid.

Accommodations are administered differently in college than in high school, partly because after high school, typically when they turn 18, students have reached the “age of majority.” According to the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, “Age of majority is the legal age established under State law at which an individual is no longer a minor and, as a young adult, has the right and responsibility to make certain legal choices that adults make.”¹ Students hold their own confidentiality, which means that the disabilities counselor cannot speak even to the parents without the student's consent. School office staff will

only disclose details about the student's disability and approved accommodations to faculty or other support personnel at the student's request. Any file or record related to accommodations or disability is kept separate from a student's main admissions file, which also means that if students change schools they must apply again for services at their new college.

It is critical for students and parents to be aware of the great disparity between the support provided in K–12 under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and that offered in college under ADA. A shorthand way to understand the difference is that colleges are only required to ensure that students can access the curriculum, whereas most K–12 special education programs, in addition to ensuring access, are also designed to promote student success. Practically speaking, IDEA regulations require individualized education program (IEP) plans, establish timelines for student evaluations, specify who must participate, and outline the dispute resolution process, thus shaping state, district, and school rules. ADA is less prescriptive and does not dictate how processes and supports for students with disabilities must be implemented; so there is more variation from college to college.

Consequently, college students are almost never granted all of the accommodations, supports, and modifications to which they were entitled in their IEPs. Colleges are permitted by law to determine which “reasonable accommodations” each applicant receives, based on a review of the documentation. Extended time on tests, testing in a quiet location, preferential seating in class, and possibly a copy of a teacher's or classmate's notes are accommodations that are often granted. Anything beyond that—relating

to learning styles, presentation of material, shortening the length of assignments, or extending deadlines, for example—is often not approved.

If a student or her family believes that she will need more extensive support than is likely to be offered by a typical disabilities office, she should explore the options detailed below. Fortunately, more supportive programs are being developed all the time due to the rapid growth in the number of college-bound students with disabilities.

Help in College, Part 2

Most programs that offer additional services for learning and living support have a hefty price tag. But if the cost is manageable and the student, the family, and the rest of the support team determine that the student can handle the program (and a move away from home, when applicable), here are some options to consider:

Dorm alternatives. Instead of living in a residence hall, students live in a facility with on-site staff and a scheduled program that focuses on study skills and life skills support. College Living Experience² and College Internship Program³ are two examples of this model.

On-campus fee-for-service programs. SALT⁴ at the University of Arizona, MAAP⁵ and MAST⁶ at Marymount California University in Palos Verdes, and Transition UP at CalState University Northridge⁷ all provide fee-for-service programs that specialize in supporting students with specific types of learning differences or autism spectrum disorders. In these programs, a counselor typically meets frequently with the student to make sure the student is on track to meet his or her educational and personal goals.

Community college. Many families opt to have their new grads attend community college for a while in order to stretch their education dollars. This is also often the best

solution if there are serious concerns about a student's ability to simultaneously manage the huge leap in academic expectation while navigating the vast social/emotional changes a student faces at this stage of life. Another benefit is that it's easy to start out slowly at community college with a part-time class load, which helps reduce the risk of failure from being overwhelmed.

Precollege year. Many people are familiar with the idea of a postgrad year, but Mitchell College in Connecticut offers a unique precollege-year program called Thames Academy.⁸ Students live on campus but with more supervision than the regular college population, and they take foundational classes to get ready for a traditional first year.

Rent-a-buddy. This isn't a formal program, but I have known several parents who have successfully supported their son or daughter through the transition to college by hiring a reliable local grad student as a designated mentor or buddy.

Free, on-campus peer-mentoring programs. A few colleges offer peer-mentoring programs for special needs students—and sometimes for all first-year students.

Regional Centers. If the student is a client of a Regional Center,⁹ that agency should be in charge of obtaining the appropriate independent living skills services (although not educational support services).

The most important thing to remember is that there will be a “right next step” for each student. My advice to students, parents, and teachers is to stay positive and hopeful and keep an open mind. Maintain the focus on finding a program that will challenge but not overwhelm. Success happens one step at a time. ◀

Crystal Reed has been counseling students with special needs since 1997. You can find her at www.NoDramaCollegeCounseling.com.

1. NCSET (2002). *Age of Majority: Preparing Your Child for Making Good Choices*. <http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=318>.
2. **College Living Experience**. <http://experiencecele.com>.
3. **College Internship Program**. <http://cipworldwide.org>.
4. **SALT: Strategic Alternative Living Techniques**. <http://www.salt.arizona.edu>.
5. **MAAP: Mariner Academy Assistance Program**. <http://www.marymountcalifornia.edu/maap-program>.
6. **MAST: Mariner Academy Strategies and Techniques**. <http://www.marymountcalifornia.edu/mast-program>.
7. **Transition UP**. <http://www.transitionup.net/#!/welcome/mainPage>.
8. **Thames Precollege Year**. <http://www.thamesacademy.org>.
9. A directory of **California Regional Centers** is at <http://www.dds.ca.gov/RC/RCList.cfm>.

- ▶ *Navigating the College Transition Maze: A Guide for Students With Learning Disabilities* is available at <http://www.hemophiliafed.org/uploads/navigatingcollegetransitionmaze.pdf>.
- ▶ *Postsecondary Education Options for Students with Intellectual Disabilities* from the Institute for Community Inclusion is at https://www.communityinclusion.org/article.php?article_id=178.

Thinking about Postsecondary Education/Training

Postsecondary goals written into your IEP regarding postsecondary education might include goals such as:

- Continue my education and go to college in preparation for a specific career path area;
- Become involved in a postsecondary training program to develop skills needed for a competitive job in a field that matches my interests and abilities;
- Develop vocational and academic skills required to enter an “on-the-job training” or “apprenticeship” program;

Postsecondary Education Checklist

Please check all the areas in which you may need help.

Postsecondary Education or Training

You need to ask about opportunities for education or training before exiting high school:

- Community College (2-year school)
- Vocational Education Business/Technical School
- Adult/Continuing Education
- College or University (4-year school)
- Apprenticeship
- On-the-job training
- Military

Career-Related Courses

Your plans may require certain courses in school to help you reach your goals:

- Vocational/Technical
- College-bound
- Computer literacy

Are You Ready for College?

As a student with a disability, it is important to know that you will need all the competencies anyone attending college needs *plus* whatever special skills or strategies are necessary for you to cope with your particular disability. Your high school is required to provide transition services; college is not. It is best to acquire the skills that you will need in college while you are still in high school rather than waiting until you arrive on a college campus. Arriving at college feeling confident in yourself and ready to meet the challenges can make the difference between success and failure.

It may be useful to complete the following self-assessment to help you decide if college is the best choice for you at this time. If you cannot answer some of these questions, discuss them with your parents, teachers, counselors, and others who will give you honest answers.

1) How good is my academic background?

- Am I enrolled in college prep classes that will prepare me for college-level course work?
- Do I have the same assignments and am I mastering the same body of knowledge and skills as other students?
- Have I planned to take all of the prerequisite courses that I will need to get into college?

2) Are my standardized test scores adequate?

- What is the range of scores required by the colleges that I am interested in?
- Have I been able to score within that range with or without accommodations?

3) What are my individual strengths and weaknesses?

- Do I have difficulty decoding, comprehending, or completing reading assignments within a reasonable time?
- Do I have difficulty with math?
- Am I good with mathematical/quantitative reasoning?
- Do I need to use a calculator for basic math?
- How good is my written expression?
- Is my handwriting legible?
- Have I mastered grammatical, spelling, editing, and re-writing skills?
- Can I research and organize material for lengthy compositions and term papers?

Are You Ready for College?

(continued)

4) On what kinds of tests do I perform well?

- Am I prepared for challenging multiple-choice or short-answer questions that require me to understand and apply the material taught?
- Do I perform well on written essays?

5) Are my study skills and learning strategies adequate?

- Do I have good listening skills?
- Do I take good notes?
- Do I know how to determine what information is important and how to study for exams?
- Am I organized enough to juggle a class schedule, complete short-term and long-term assignments, and stay current with the course syllabus?
- Can I sustain attention in challenging classes?

6) Am I disciplined enough to manage my time and meet academic deadlines?

- Do I deal well with unstructured environments?
- Can I handle the choices and freedoms that I will face in a college environment?

7) Am I determined to succeed in school?

- Am I willing to work harder than other students on occasion to accomplish the same goals?
- If I receive a poor grade on a test or a paper, am I willing to contact a teacher and accept constructive criticism in order to improve my performance?

8) Do I have a positive attitude and am I flexible?

- Are my confidence and self-esteem reasonably healthy?
- Am I able to withstand difficulties and pressure?
- What effect does stress have on my academic achievement?

9) Do I have good problem-solving and decision-making skills?

- Can I access community and college resources for assistance if needed?
- Do I know how to monitor my progress in academic settings?

Think about your answers.

Are they the answers of someone who is ready for college?

What Type of Support Is Available at College?

What makes the transition process especially confusing is that every college differs in terms of how much support is offered to students with disabilities. Although special education services do not generally exist at the college level, some colleges do in fact offer comprehensive support programs to students with disabilities.

Most colleges and universities will have information about services for students with disabilities listed on their Web site. You may also find guidelines for the type of disability documentation that is required to obtain accommodations as well as descriptions of the types of services that are available to all students on a particular campus (e.g., writing or math labs, Freshman Year Experiences, summer orientation camps, peer tutoring services, personal or career counseling, study skills instruction).

Most campuses offer a tour. At that time, you may request to talk with someone in the college Disability Services Office as well as with students on campus who have a similar disability. Matching a college to fit your learning style is an important first step to success.

Questions to Ask a College Disability Services Office

1. What information must be provided to document a disability and to whom should it be given? How recent should the documentation be?
2. How accessible is the campus to students with physical disabilities?
 - A. Availability of transportation across campus?
 - B. Accessibility of buildings?
3. Where is the Disability Services Office on campus and does it have evening hours?
4. How is the Disability Services Office staffed?
5. Is the staff trained in specialized areas of disabilities?
6. How many staff are full-time? How many are part-time?
7. Are there extra costs associated with the disability support programs?
8. Is there an orientation program or a summer preparation course especially designed for students with disabilities?
9. Who supervises testing accommodations?
10. What is the retention rate for all first-year students and how does this compare with the rate for students with disabilities?
11. What special services are provided to students with disabilities?
12. Are supports available in the areas of study skills, writing, organizational skills, or time management? Are the programs staffed by individuals trained to work with students with disabilities?
13. Is course-specific tutoring available? Is this different than the services provided by the Disability Services Office staff?
14. Are counseling services available in personal, academic, or vocational areas?
15. What (assistive) technology is available?
16. Do you anticipate that the services you are describing to me now will be available next year?
17. What is the school's history of providing disability services? Have any lawsuits or Office for Civil Rights complaints been filed against the school in the past five years? If yes, how were these resolved?
18. What is the climate on campus for students with disabilities?

Sample Transition Goals and Objectives Bank

Postsecondary Education or Training

Goal: Student will acquire the skills to successfully transition to a two-year or four-year college/university or vocational training program.

Objectives:

- ___ Student will enroll in classes that will prepare him/her for the challenges of postsecondary education.
- ___ Student will meet with guidance counselor/general education teacher and/or special education teacher to discuss academic requirements for pursuing vocational training and/or a college degree.
- ___ Student will demonstrate skill in developing a positive school profile and resume that will be used in the college/training application process.
- ___ Student will participate in at least one extracurricular activity in order to develop non-academic aspects of learning.
- ___ Student will describe his/her disability in terms of learning strengths and needs.
- ___ Student will attend postsecondary options fairs, events, and group sessions provided by the school.
- ___ Student will participate in the traditional standardized tests necessary for acceptance to postsecondary institutions (e.g: PSATs, SATs, ACCUPLACER).
- ___ Student will complete the paperwork necessary to take the standardized tests with accommodations.
- ___ Student will schedule a visit with the Disability Services Coordinator at a minimum of two colleges/universities to determine the levels and types of services available.
- ___ Student will describe the accommodations available to him/her in postsecondary settings.
- ___ Student will be able to explain the differences in protections under the special education law (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- ___ Student will request that all evaluation data required to obtain accommodations at the postsecondary level be completed as close to high school graduation as possible but at least within the student's last three years.

Sample Transition Goals and Objectives Bank

Postsecondary Education or Training

(continued)

Objectives:

Student will receive direct skills training in becoming a positive self-advocate:

- Learn whom to ask and when to ask for assistance.
- Practice describing what is needed in order to become a successful student.
- Develop and practice negotiation skills to help get what is wanted/needed.
- Develop strategies for seeking assistance.
- Discuss disability needs in the context of seeking accommodations.

Student will practice needed postsecondary education strategies:

- Time management
- Test preparation
- Study partner/study group
- Note-taking techniques
- Special study locations
- Stress reduction techniques
- Text anxiety reduction activities

- Student will develop the skills to organize school work with efficiency.
- Student will develop strategies to enhance study skills.
- Student will identify what testing, evaluation data, and documentation are required in order to receive accommodations at the postsecondary level.
- Student will develop a resume and postsecondary list of options before the final year of high school.
- Student will write a personal essay in the fall of his/her final year of high school.
- Student will investigate availability of financial aid and complete paperwork.
- Student will research resources within and outside the college to find appropriate support:
 - Determine eligibility for vocational rehabilitation services through the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS).
 - Research private tutoring, if necessary.
 - Research personal care assistance services, if necessary.

My Transition Goal

My goal for *Postsecondary Education or Training* is:

The objectives/activities I need to have included in my **IEP** to help me reach this goal are:

For students with an IEP, please bring this book to your IEP meeting and copy these pages for members of your IEP.

Sample Transition Goals and Objectives Bank

Organizational and Study Skills

Goal: Student will demonstrate organizational and study skills in order to participate successfully in academic classes.

Objectives:

- ___ Student will self-monitor homework by maintaining an assignment note pad that lists all assignments and due dates.
- ___ Student will monitor long-term assignments by breaking down assignments, setting up blocks of time for completion of each part, and recording and monitoring progress.
- ___ Student will show preparation for learning by reporting to class on time with the necessary materials.
- ___ Student will complete assigned tasks by following oral and written directions.
- ___ Student will complete assigned tasks by beginning within a reasonable amount of time and finishing within a specified time frame.
- ___ Student will work toward effective task completion by remaining on task, ignoring distractions, and working independently for a specified period of time.
- ___ Student will assess correctness of assignments and tests by reviewing for errors and making necessary revisions.
- ___ Student will demonstrate understanding of concepts presented in class by applying study skills (e.g., note taking, outlining, summarizing).
- ___ Student will gain understanding of class content by identifying key words, taking notes, and using compensatory devices as needed.
- ___ Student will actively prepare for tests and quizzes by applying strategies (e.g., mnemonics, visualization, graphic organizers, outlining, attending extra help sessions).
- ___ Student will demonstrate organizational skills by keeping class work and notebooks orderly.
- ___ Student will demonstrate self-advocacy skills by planning with classroom teachers for academic and behavioral needs.
- ___ Student will accept the consequences of being unprepared for class by discussing such consequences with the teacher and planning to avoid such problems in the future.
- ___ Student will improve test-taking skills by acquiring and applying strategies.

Sample Transition Goals and Objectives Bank

Organizational and Study Skills

(continued)

Objectives:

- ___ Student will prepare for active participation in classes by previewing and later reviewing topics of study.
- ___ Student will independently seek assistance in classes by working with a classmate and checking thoroughness of notes and clarity of assignments.
- ___ Student will increase retention of material read by applying strategies for approaching the reading of content materials (e.g., scanning, skimming, note-taking, outlining, summarizing).
- ___ Student will accept academic responsibility by utilizing study periods and working with staff to meet study skills objectives.
- ___ Student will self-monitor assignment completion by prioritizing tasks and breaking down assignments into workable units.
- ___ Student will complete research projects by setting a timeline for completion, locating primary and secondary sources, taking notes from these sources, citing sources, organizing by sub-topic, and presenting an oral or written report.
- ___ Student will access the reading component of classes through the use of recorded materials as needed.
- ___ Student will employ compensatory strategies in setting goals in content classes, such as: creating a strategy to record assignments; developing a strategy to improve grades; monitoring time spent on specific subjects; and following through on the use of particular strategies.
- ___ Student will improve memory strategies by acquiring and applying a variety of memory techniques.
- ___ Student will improve note-taking skills by acquiring and applying strategies for written and oral sources.
- ___ Student will independently arrange conferences/extra-help sessions with teachers.
- ___ Student will complete assignments on time and according to designated criteria by recording assignments, budgeting time appropriately, being prepared with all necessary materials, and seeking help when necessary.
- ___ Student will earn a passing grade in academic courses by participating in in-class discussions/activities, utilizing various study skills, and actively preparing for tests/quizzes.
- ___ Student will accept academic responsibility by attending classes on a regular basis, participating in class discussions and activities, and completing assignments according to established timelines.

My Transition Goal

My goal for *Organizational and Study Skills* is:

The objectives/activities I need to have included in my **IEP** to help me reach this goal are:
