

## **HOW TO DECIDE WHICH COLLEGE IS FOR YOU**

### **IF YOU HAVE A LEARNING DISABILITY**

If choosing a college feels like the biggest decision you've ever had to make, it's because it just might be. After all, the school you attend will help determine the jobs that will be available to you, who your friends will be, even where you'll live and work after college.

To start, make an honest self-assessment. Write down your interests and goals -anything from nonacademic things, say, fishing, to very serious items, like your desire to find a cure for AIDS.

Understand the nature of your learning disability. You have strengths as well as weaknesses. Knowing the impact your learning disability has in your life will go a long way to helping you decide which college is best for you. Many high school graduates with learning disabilities are tempted to conceal their learning difficulties - after all there will be no one at the college to seek you out and insist that you access accommodations. However, accepting your learning disability can be invaluable to you and help you insure your success at college and work. Your ability to articulate your needs will help you identify the most appropriate school for you, but it will also help those around you accommodate your needs. Begin by discussing your disability with your college advisor or case manager and parents so you can devise a strategy for your college applications.

As you begin to look at colleges, you will see that most colleges have entrance requirements. One of the common entrance requirements is taking the ACT or SAT. Many students with learning disabilities can qualify for accommodations such as extended time, distraction free testing, or readers on these exams. Taking exams such as the ACT and SAT with appropriate accommodations can help you demonstrate to the colleges that you would be a good fit for their institution. Many students with disabilities don't understand that accommodations are given to help minimize the impact of a disability — not give an unfair advantage. While the scores from the ACT and SAT are only one factor that colleges consider in accepting students, it is an important factor and you want to look the best you can.

Many students, who are planning for college, begin by taking classes in high school that will help them prepare for college. Students with disabilities need to take these classes as well. Often students with disabilities spend much of their time in high school working on basic skills. Basic skills are important, but you may need to consider if there isn't a better way to improve your reading than trying to memorize the same list of words that you have been working on for the last two years. Consider using accommodations like books on tape to help yourself with these deficits and use the time that you would have spent on basic skills taking college prep classes. Also, recent research is demonstrating that students who begin using accommodations similar to the accommodations they would use in college while still in high school do better in college. Many students who have to change the accommodations they use when they get to college usually struggle while learning how to make the new accommodations effective. Look at the handout "The Differences Between High School and College" to help you determine what

accommodation changes might be ahead of you because of the different academic environments. If possible, begin using college accommodations while still in high school.

Make sure the documentation of your disability is complete and up to date. ADA and Section 504 both require you to provide appropriate documentation of your disability and needs to the college you attend. Requirements for documentation can vary, but following the AHEAD documentation guidelines can help insure that your documentation is complete. Once you have narrowed your choices for college down to a manageable number, check with each institution about specific documentation requirements.

To begin your college search, send away for catalogs from colleges you've heard of or think you may want to attend. In the beginning, choosing a school may seem somewhat unsystematic, even haphazard.

At this stage, that's the point. Until you've ruled a school out, there's a chance you'll go there. The only way to rule a school out is to get information on it.

Read through the catalog of a college and ask yourself if you'd like to live and learn there. Surprisingly, the living part can be more important in choosing than the learning. While there are many colleges where you can get a good education, there are probably fewer that meet your "environmental standards." Here are some criteria you should consider in evaluating colleges.

- Location, location, location! Location is the primary rule in real estate as well as in choosing a college. If you choose a college that is located in a locale that is uncomfortable to you - college will also be uncomfortable. That is a terrible way to spend one of the most important times in your life and it will eventually impact your performance at school.
- School size. The size of the college you attend can have a huge effect on your college experience. The advantages of a large school — more activities, more majors, bigger/better facilities can be set off by the bigger responsibility you will have to take in planning your education and finding housing. At a small school you may get more personal attention and have the opportunity to work more closely with your professors. These differences can impact how you feel about school and about how committed you feel towards your education.
- Friends. Going to college with friends can be great. Having close friends nearby can make the first weeks of freshman year less intimidating. But you're more likely to make more new friends if you don't keep falling back on the old gang. Feelings of freshman alienation usually don't last beyond the first few weeks. And people change. The people you hang out with now won't necessarily be the ones you'll hang out with in a couple of years (including boyfriends and girlfriends!).
- Housing. As important as where you live - is how you live. Colleges differ greatly in the housing they offer. Some offer none at all. Some don't permit off-campus living. Do you mind showering in front of a dozen other people? Are single rooms available (especially if you need a quiet study space as an accommodation for your disability)? If it matters to you, find out. It may sound strange, but the location of your freshman dormitory can have a bigger impact on your freshman

year than the quality of your courses. Your living arrangements will influence who your friends are, how you spend your free time, how early you have to get up in the morning, and how late you stay up at night. Life in virtually all freshman dormitories is alike in some respects: it's loud, messy, crowded, and a lot of fun. There are important differences, though, and understanding them before you make a commitment can lead to a happier four years.

- What do your parents think? Your parents can be a great resource at this time. Who knows you better than mom? Your parents can help you understand why some things are important to you and help you sort through the piles of information. However, don't make the mistake of letting your parents' wishes prevent you from applying to a school you think you would enjoy attending. Extend equal courtesy to your parents, and don't decide to apply or not apply to an institution because your parents want you to do so. Think these things out rationally, and plot appropriate strategies. Do your homework. If money is a problem, find out about sources of financial aid before you talk to your parents.
- Money. How much money your parents can afford to spend on college will affect the school you choose and the life you live once you get there. The average annual price tag on a four-year public school is \$13,000, while private colleges average \$30,000. If you need tutoring or other support services beyond what the college offers or wish to participate in a special program the college does offer, this will add to your college bill. To handle these responsibilities, you may have to juggle outside jobs with your schoolwork and graduate with debts. One of the first things you have to do is sit down with your parents and talk honestly about the bottom line.
- Faculty credentials. The most important factor influencing students' satisfaction with their academic programs is the quality of their professors. Year after year, students at the nation's most famous research-oriented universities learn that academic prestige and the ability to teach undergraduates do not go hand in hand. Do consider the types of degrees the faculty at each institution have, but also ask if the colleges provide the faculty with training in how to teach and work with students who have disabilities and what the turn out is for these sessions. If a college offers training, but no one shows up, it is useless. The type of turn out at faculty training can help you get a feel for how committed the faculty is to helping students learn.
- Course offerings. If you've known since you were three that you want to be a tree surgeon, make sure that the colleges you apply to have degree-granting course work in tree surgery. But keep in mind that freshmen change their course studies an average of five times, so attending a school that supports a variety of disciplines is always a good idea.
- Technology. Computers are a necessity in the modern workplace. Computers may also play a large role in helping you to accommodate for your disability. The college that you attend should have better facilities than you have at home or at high school. The college should also offer courses that teach you how to use the technology — especially if you need to use special hardware or software to

accommodate for your disability. Remember that a computer is only as good as your ability to use it, so knowledge about using equipment is as important as equipment. The importance of these qualities in a college to help you prepare for work in the information age cannot be overestimated.

- Extracurriculars. If you need to play soccer, make sure the college has a soccer team that competes at the level that you are accustomed to. Activities outside of the classroom are important to your overall well being. Just as living environment is important, so are the opportunities to enjoy yourself and let go.
- The library. The raw number of books in a library won't affect your education because of the availability of books through inter-library loans and the capability to use the Internet to do research. The quality of the staff in the library is important. The staff's knowledge of how to sort through information, how quickly they respond to your inter-library requests, and find resources is invaluable.
- Disability Services. While there are laws that mandate the provision of support services to persons with disabilities, the laws leave how services are provided up to each institution. As a result, each institution determines how accommodations are provided based on their own environment. At one university they may allow you to work directly with your instructors to set up test accommodations. Another may require that the Disability Services Office do it for you. How comfortable you feel about how the services are provided will make a difference in how you use the services. If you disagree with how services are done, you will be less likely to access the services. This could ultimately impact your grades. Take time to contact the Disability Services office of each college you consider and find out about their practices and policies.
- Tutorial support. While law does not mandate tutorial support, many colleges recognize that all students need help at one time or another. Find out how extensive the services are. Is there one-on-one tutoring sessions, drop in labs, or a combination. Some colleges may offer a special tutorial support program for students with learning disabilities at an extra cost. It may be worth it to you to participate in one of these programs to help you get through college.

Now that you've been given some factors to consider, it's time to match them up with what each college really has to offer. It is a lot of information to sort through, but it's the next four or more years of your life. If you wait until the last minute, you won't have the luxury of an informed decision.

(Adapted from "The Best College for You" the Time/Princeton Review, 1997.)