

Need Extra Help? Don't Be Afraid to Ask

Students with learning disabilities expect a place in college. Schools will go out of their way to support them

By Diane Cole
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As a high school freshman in Harker Heights, Texas, Lindsey Disher found herself struggling to read the scientific terminology in her biology textbook, regardless of the hours she put in. Around the same time, her English teacher noticed her written work was filled with reversed and inverted letters. "Have you ever been tested for a learning disability?" she asked.

The tests that followed showed Disher suffered from dyslexia—one of a variety of learning disorders that affect how the brain processes information. "But just because you have a learning disability doesn't mean you're dumber, or you can't excel or do what you want to in your education. It just means you learn differently," she says. Disher should know: She completed high school in just three years and, at age 18, is now finishing her freshman year at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, her grades a mix of A's and B's.

As Disher's experience shows, a learning disability need not prove a barrier to college. The proportion of students with learning disabilities entering four-year colleges rose from 0.5 percent in 1983 to 2.8 percent in 2004, according to UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute. That increase sounds dramatic—but it's consistent with the number of students with learning disabilities attending elementary and secondary schools. It reflects what UCLA's Victor Saenz describes as "an evolution of understanding" about the subject that is reflected in greater awareness, earlier interventions, a decreased sense of stigma, and a legal requirement that students with learning disabilities be accommodated. That can mean extra time for taking tests, access to books and lectures on tape, and additional classes or tutoring.

Getting AHEAD. Carol Funckes, associate director of disability resources at the University of Arizona, in Tucson, says that approximately 1,600 of the university's 36,000 students identify themselves as disabled. About 1,100 of those have learning disabilities, a 100-fold increase from the 11 students who received help for learning disabilities in 1980. "The increase isn't a reflection of more students who have LD but more who have been diagnosed and are willing to come forward and ask for help," says Funckes, who is also president of the Association on Higher Education and Disability. "There are an increasing number of people who are ready for college because the high schools are recognizing and preparing the students rather than just assuming they're not smart enough."

These students are no different from other high school seniors searching for a college with the right fit. But for them, the right fit means a school that, in addition to all the other qualities they're looking for, provides the services they need.

Structured approach. University of Arizona junior Elizabeth Breininger, 21, had "excellent" grades throughout high school, she says, but scored significantly lower in math than English on her SAT and ACT tests as a result of her math learning disability. She visited and applied to colleges "with very well structured programs for students with learning disabilities" and ultimately decided on Arizona. "Coming from a small town in Pennsylvania, I wanted to go to a big college with high-level athletic programs, lots of activities, and lots of people," she says. Equally important was the level of support offered at the university. In addition to being eligible for accommodations provided by the office of disabilities, LD students may apply for additional assistance from the university's Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques Center. For an additional fee (from \$950 to \$2,200 per semester), each student in the SALT program has access to tutoring as well as computer, math, and writing labs, and is assigned a learning specialist with whom he or she meets weekly to evaluate how the semester is progressing and if any further help is needed.

"It really was great when I realized that I can get all the services I need and not have to give up any of the other things I want to do," says Breininger. "If I had not used and embraced these options, I would not be nearly as successful," she says. She gets A's and B's and is majoring in rehabilitation counseling.

Blaine Todfield, who is finishing her freshman year at Arizona, said SALT made a "huge" difference in her transition from high school to college. "Every week we go over my grades and my work, and what I can do to improve," she says. "It really keeps me on top of my work."

For students looking for similar programs at colleges with a different size or location, there are many possibilities. Curry College in Milton, Mass., with only about 2,000 undergraduates, offers a well-established program for students with learning disabilities. About 25 percent of students at Curry have a learning disability, says Lisa Ijiri, who directs the school's Program for Advancement of Learning, a fee-based program that also pairs each student with an individual learning specialist. Through intensive mentoring, "Students learn how they learn and how to continue to learn," says Ijiri. In addition, because the program has been in place since 1970, "we have thousands of successful alumni who can come back and talk about how they're managing LD in successful careers as lawyers or doctors or in management and business."

HELP is at hand. Among midsize schools, Marshall University in Huntington, W.Va., with about 10,000 undergraduates, offers Higher Education for Learning Problems, or HELP. "We address reading skills, reading speed, comprehension, test-taking strategy, time management, and improvement of self-esteem," says Barbara Guyer, who founded HELP in 1981. She urges collegebound students with learning disabilities to evaluate what types of support they may need, then visit prospective colleges and take a good look at the services offered. "Find the program director, ask questions, and take notes or tape-record the answers," she says.

Finding—and using—those resources from freshman year on can make a big difference. Out of about 200 undergraduates who use HELP, about 50 made the dean's list this year, Guyer says. One recent graduate proudly told her: "Because all of my life I have had to work harder, my work ethic is exceptional, and that will give me a leg up in the workplace."

Funckes also suggests that students look at a college's educational philosophy: Is the school student-centered? Are faculty members sensitive to learning differences? Does the college foster interactions between students and teachers?

On a more mundane note, because colleges require different documents than do secondary schools to certify a learning disability, get a head start gathering all the paperwork. Once you've arrived on campus, speak up if you need additional help. Commitment, self-discipline, and self-advocacy are the key elements of success.

What's legal, what's not. Although it's illegal for colleges to discriminate against disabilities, some students may decide to discuss their learning disability in a separate essay or give permission to include the information in a letter from a high school guidance counselor. That could be used to explain, say, the discrepancy between poor grades one year, before a learning disability was diagnosed, and improved grades later, after accommodations and tutoring were put in place. However, "if you meet the requirements for college admission, there is no reason to tell the admissions office that you have LD, because that is irrelevant," says Funckes.

Although at first she was undecided, in the end Todfield decided to identify herself on her applications as having LD because she knew that every school on her list had a strong support program that she would use. "My advice to anyone applying to college," she says, "is it's a difficult process, but don't be ashamed, don't be embarrassed. You don't have to hide your learning disability."

tip. Many schools (including several mentioned here) offer scholarships for learning-disabled students. www.college-scholarships.com maintains a list of them.