Finding the Right Fit: Using the College Search Process to Reduce Anxiety for Students with Learning Disabilities and ADHD
Introduction
The college search process and the transition from high school to college can seem daunting and anxiety provoking for any student and family. It can feel particularly overwhelming for students with learning disabilities and ADHD. Despite the anxiety that corresponds with leaving high school and entering postsecondary education, research suggests that there has been an increase in the number of college students reporting that they have a learning disability or ADHD. For example, between 1988 and 2000, survey data of freshman college students indicated that the category of “learning disability” was the fastest growing category among students reporting a disability (Henderson 2001). According to Melana Vickers (2010), during the last decade the proportion of undergraduate students with a learning disability or ADD/ADHD has almost doubled. In addition, based on a 2009 report from the US Government Accountability Office, which examined the distribution of different types of disabilities among college students, the percentage of postsecondary students with learning disabilities had increased from five percent to 8.9 percent from 2000 to 2008 and the percentage of students with ADHD had almost tripled during this time period (United States Government Accountability Office 2009).

Although the number of students with learning disabilities and ADHD entering college has been increasing, studies show that these students can have more difficulty than their peers achieving success in higher education. Survey data from the National Center of Education Statistics indicated that students with disabilities were less likely to have attained their degree and to have persisted in postsecondary education over a five-year period as compared to students without disabilities (Hurst and Smerdon 2000). Other research suggests that students with learning disabilities and ADHD may have a greater risk of discontinuing their postsecondary education as compared to students without disabilities (Murray et al. 2000; Lee et al. 2008). Furthermore, the college search process and college experiences can feel overwhelming and produce high anxiety for students with learning disabilities and ADHD (Connor 2012; Cohn 1998). In a study done in 2009, researchers found that undergraduate students, who reported having a learning disability, were more likely to have an impaired sense of well-being associated with anxiety and sadness as compared to their peers (Davis et al. 2009).

The difficulties that students with learning disabilities and ADHD experience in college can often be traced back to the college search process and ultimately the transition made from high school to postsecondary education. For example, Janiga and Costenbader (2002) reported that college service providers indicated that students with learning disabilities were often unprepared for the transition from high school to college. The high school environment for many students with learning disabilities and ADHD is often filled with external support. Teachers, guidance counselors, intervention specialists, and parents play a prominent role in supporting students academically, emotionally and socially, while also ensuring that students are making sufficient educational progress. However, when students with disabilities enter the college environment, the external support system tends to diminish. Thus, students become more responsible for monitoring their own progress as well as seeking out appropriate assistance. In addition, college students with learning disabilities report that peers, staff members and faculty often do not have a clear understanding of their learning challenges (Lehmann et al. 2000). This can lead
to a heightened sense of anxiety when students begin the college search process and ultimately transition into a college environment. Overall, the research suggests that there should be a greater emphasis on helping students with learning disabilities and ADHD with the college search process to alleviate feelings of anxiety regarding the transition from high school to college.

Although research indicates that many students with learning disabilities and ADHD face challenges as they move from high school to college, there are a number of concrete steps that students can take during the college search process to help them select a college that aligns with their goals and needs. Many students with learning disabilities and ADHD along with their families feel unsure about where to begin with the college search process and the factors to consider when preparing to make the transition to the college level. This article aims to provide practical ways that students with learning disabilities and ADHD can use the college search process to make informed decisions about choosing a college and reduce the anxiety involved with entering the college environment.

Eight Ways to Alleviate Anxiety Through the College Search Process

1. Evaluate Specific Needs: The college search process is often more productive when students have a clear understanding of their academic, social, medical, and/or emotional needs. When students take the time to understand their specific needs, they are more likely to identify colleges that can provide them with the appropriate resources and support. For example, one important aspect for students with learning disabilities and ADHD to consider is the level of support offered by different colleges. While some colleges offer the minimum accommodations/services as required by law, many colleges offer additional support services that can be helpful for students. Moreover, there are a growing number of colleges that offer structured support programs for students with learning disabilities and/or ADHD. When students have a clear understanding of their specific needs, it is more likely that they will choose a college with the appropriate level of support to help them be successful in a postsecondary environment.

2. Make College Visits Count: Visiting colleges is an important step for students as they engage in the process of finding postsecondary institutions that will address their needs and goals. It is most beneficial to visit colleges in a planned and an organized manner. For example, students should contact the office of admission in advance to register for an official information session as well as for a campus tour. In arranging for a campus visit, students can also inquire about opportunities to examine housing options, observe a class, meet with a representative from a department of interest, and talk with current students on the campus. Additionally, students with learning disabilities and ADHD should arrange to meet with a representative from the Office of Disability Services (see #3). Overall, the college visit process makes it more likely that students will choose a college that has a comfortable environment.

3. Arrange to Speak with Representatives from Offices of Disability Services (ODS): One of the most important steps in the college search process involves making an appointment to meet with a representative in the ODS at each college of interest. It is recommended that this be done during the college search process as opposed to once a student arrives on a campus for their freshman year. A list of questions that students can use when meeting with an ODS representative can be found in the Appendix.

When students meet with a representative from the ODS, it is important that they find out about the types of support services and accommodations that are offered through the ODS, as well as the system that is used to access these services and accommodations. The types of support services can vary among colleges. As a result, it is important for students to inquire about the services that are available at each college of interest. Meeting with a representative from the ODS can play a critical role in determining if the support provided at a college aligns with a student’s needs and goals. Ellen Kasulis, a former ODS representative, said, “It is important that students contact the ODS early on in the college search process so that they can get a clear picture of the accommodations and services provided. This will help students determine if a college is a good match.”

4. Examine the General Academic Support Resources on College Campuses: While it is important for students with learning disabilities and ADHD to carefully examine the support offered by the ODS, it is also valuable for students to examine the general academic resources that are available to all students at a college. The academic support services on a college campus extend beyond the ODS. For example, colleges often have writing centers, general tutoring services, subject-specific tutoring, supplemental instruction for certain courses, and study skills workshops. Troiano, Liefeld and Trachtenberg (2010) examined the impact of students with learning disabilities using academic support centers in the college environment. They found that students with learning disabilities who attended academic support centers were more likely to have higher overall grade point averages and to have higher rates of retention in college.

---

This research finding suggests the importance of students with disabilities being aware of the academic supports that are available on a college campus. The academic support services vary among colleges, which makes it important for students to identify the academic resources that would be of help to them. Students can alleviate their anxiety about transitioning to college when they are clearly aware of the resources on a campus that can be utilized for academic assistance.

5. Look Beyond Academics: It is important for students with learning disabilities and ADHD to examine the types of social and extracurricular opportunities that are available on a college campus. Social engagement on a college campus can increase the success and retention rates for students with disabilities. Mamiseishvili and counselors, intervention specialists, and parents often advocate on behalf of the students. However, as Hamblet (2009) points out that in college, there is nothing that will happen without the student initiating a request. Thus, students must advocate for themselves and request accommodations through the appropriate process using the school’s procedures. Lock and Layton (2001) support this idea by indicating that young adults with learning disabilities must learn to be their own advocates—particularly in a postsecondary setting.

As students begin thinking about college, it is important for them to consider the self-advocacy skills that will be needed to be successful in a college environment. For example, at the college level, students are responsible for requesting accommodations and support services from the ODS. As a result, students should be able to express their needs and the rationale behind obtaining the appropriate level of support. Additionally, students should be prepared to speak with college professors about their accommodations and to ask for assistance when it is needed to understand class material.

Koch (2011) looked at the factors involved in the persistence of moving from the first year of college to the second year of college among students with disabilities. They found that social integration was a key factor in determining the retention of students with disabilities in college. This suggests the important role of socialization in the college environment and underscores the significance of examining the types of extracurricular opportunities that are available at a college. Students can investigate the types of extracurricular activities offered at colleges to make sure that there are ample options for them to become actively involved in the campus community. Anxiety about beginning college can be reduced when students know that they have clubs, organizations or extracurricular activities that will connect them to others on a college campus.

6. Build Self-Advocacy Skills Through the College Search: Research supports the idea that self-advocacy skills are important to the success of students with learning disabilities and ADHD in a college environment. In the high school environment, teachers, professors, and professionals have been involved in the educational process. However, college professors and the academic community have different expectations for students with disabilities. Students should be prepared to take the lead during the college search process, students can build confidence in their abilities to explain their needs, discuss their goals and make decisions. They can plan their visits, make appointments, and ask questions to determine if a college is a good fit. When students meet with ODS representatives, it is important that they are able to clearly articulate their educational, social, medical and/or emotional needs. By taking the lead during the college search process, students can build confidence in their abilities to explain their needs, discuss their goals and make decisions.

The college search process is an excellent opportunity for students to practice their self-advocacy skills. Students can take the lead in scheduling college visits, making appointments with representatives at colleges of interest, and asking questions to determine if a college is a good fit. When students meet with ODS representatives, it is important that they are able to clearly articulate their educational, social, medical and/or emotional needs. By taking the lead during the college search process, students can build confidence in their abilities to explain their needs, discuss their goals and make decisions. This in turn can reduce the anxiety about being able to self-advocate in a college environment. In addition, students can learn how to be effective self-advocates by playing a leadership role in their educational
decisions in high school. According to Hamblet (2009), students are frequently left out of the IEP process in high school, which can lead to a more difficult transition to the college environment. As students progress through high school, they can play an integral role in advocating for themselves and expressing the types of support that they feel is needed. When students are able to practice self-advocacy skills in high school and during the college search process, it can better prepare them for a postsecondary educational environment.

7. Develop a Plan to Deal with Challenges: As students with learning disabilities and ADHD move through the college search process and begin considering specific colleges, it can be helpful to develop a plan to be used if difficulties arise during their freshman year. Feelings of anxiety can increase as students begin to consider questions such as: What will I do if I have difficulty in my college classes? Where will I go if I need emotional support? What will happen if I need medical attention? How will I get home if the need arises?

8. Research Important Aspects of Each College of Interest: One of the ways that students can use the college search process to alleviate anxiety is by finding out about important information for each college they are considering. The more information that students can obtain about a college, the more likely they will feel comfortable choosing a postsecondary institution that will be a good fit. Some of the important considerations with regards to the college search and selection process are included below.

- Admission Standards: When students begin the college search process, it is important to examine the admission criteria for colleges of interest. Admission criteria may include grade point average, standardized test scores, strength of the high school schedule, letters of recommendation, application essay questions, extracurricular activities, etc. It is important for students to consider their own high school profile and achievements along with the admission standards, admission information from previously admitted students, and overall admission rates when applying to colleges. By carefully reviewing admission information, students can increase the likelihood that they will have choices when it is time to select a postsecondary institution.

- Location: Students should consider the location of the college. Is the college in a city, a suburban area or a rural area? These can offer different opportunities for students and can have advantages and disadvantages. Students should also consider the distance from their hometown to a college. It may be important for some students to be within easy access of getting home if the need arises.

- The Size of the College: Students should consider whether a large, medium or small school is the best fit for them. Large schools tend to provide a greater number of opportunities and

When students plan ahead and become aware of the support resources that are available, it is more likely that they will be able to navigate their way through obstacles that may confront them. Thus, during the college search process, students can find out about support resources such as a college’s counseling center, a student health center on campus, a doctor’s office in the community nearby the campus, and the easiest ways to get home from the campus if the need arises. It will depend on the specific needs of each student with regards to the types of support resources that may be helpful.

Anxiety can be alleviated by using these types of questions to formulate a plan and identify important resources during the college search process. Students can develop plans to deal with challenges by becoming familiar with the resources both on and off a campus. When students plan ahead and become aware of the support resources that are available, it is more likely that they will be able to navigate their way through obstacles that may confront them. Thus, during the college search process, students can find out about support resources such as a college’s counseling center, a student health center on campus, a doctor’s office in the community nearby the campus, and the easiest ways to get home from the campus if the need arises. It will depend on the specific needs of each student with regards to the types of support resources that may be helpful. Overall, students are often better equipped to handle difficult situations in the college environment if they have a plan in place that involves knowing how and where to access assistance.
more class options, but small schools tend to provide more individual attention for undergraduate students. Medium-sized schools can provide a nice compromise between a large school and a small school. However, it is important for students to examine the unique attributes of all colleges of interest to determine suitability.

- **The Accessibility of the Faculty:** Students should examine the accessibility of the faculty to undergraduate students. Many colleges provide information about the faculty to student ratio and the typical number of students in a class. Students can also ask admission counselors, department representatives and current college students about the access to faculty outside of class time.

- **The Campus:** With regards to the campus, students should consider the housing options available, the nature of the area surrounding the campus, the social scene on the campus, and special programs or opportunities provided on the campus. Students should also consider the actual size of the campus, as well as the layout to make sure that it meets their needs.

- **Academic Options and Requirements:** It is important to consider the academic majors and programs of study that are available at each college of interest. It is also important to inquire about the general education requirements as well as the requirements for college majors that need to be completed to earn a degree.

- **A Career Center:** Most colleges have a career center to help students explore career interests and to help them with job placement after college. Students are encouraged to find out about the types of services that the career center offers at each college of interest. Students should also inquire about the types of career fairs or events sponsored by the career center.

**Conclusion**

The college search process is an opportunity for all students to increase the likelihood of finding a college that will meet their needs and goals. While the college search process can seem overwhelming for students with learning disabilities and ADHD, there are ways it can be used to alleviate the anxiety of transitioning from high school to college. The considerations included in this article are intended to help students with learning disabilities and ADHD use the college search process to reduce anxiety and better prepare them for their postsecondary endeavors. Additionally, educators can use the information included in this article as a guide to promote a productive college search for students with learning disabilities and ADHD. Ultimately, the way that the college search process is conducted can reduce the stress associated with leaving the familiarity of high school and continuing their educational pursuits in a college environment.

**Appendix: Questions Students Should Ask Representatives from Offices of Disability Services (ODS)**

1. What documentation is required to become eligible to receive accommodations and services through the ODS?
   a. Based on the disability, are there specific evaluations or test results that need to be submitted to become eligible to receive services?
   b. How current should the documentation be?
   c. What is the process that is used to review the documentation and to determine eligibility?

2. How many staff members are there in the ODS? What are the main roles of the staff members?

3. Do staff members in the ODS have previous experience working with students with a disability or an area of need that is similar to my own? If yes, what types of accommodations and services have been provided in the past?

4. How many students at the college receive assistance through the ODS?

5. What types of accommodations and services are provided directly through the ODS? (e.g., extended time on tests, a distraction free testing environment, the use of a calculator on tests, note taking assistance, audio books, adaptive or assistive technology resources, priority registration, professional tutoring, peer tutoring, study skills training, academic advising…).

6. Are there any unique or additional services offered through the ODS that students seem to find helpful?

7. Does the ODS offer a place for students to take exams or to study (e.g., a distraction-reduced environment or a place to finish exams when extra time is needed)?

8. If I am a student at the college, who would be my primary contact person in the ODS?
   a. Would I have a separate advisor outside of the ODS?

9. Are there any fees for the services that are offered by the ODS?

10. What types of general academic support services are available for all students on the campus?
11. Are there services provided to assist freshmen students with the transition from high school to college?
12. How are professors at the college notified about the academic accommodations for students with disabilities?
   a. What provisions are in place in case an issue occurs with receiving accommodations?
13. What types of housing options or housing accommodations are available on campus?
14. What types of resources are available on the campus that may be helpful to me (e.g., medical facilities, psychological services, consultants, specialists...)?
   a. Are there fees for any of the on-campus services?
15. What types of community resources are near the college that may be helpful for me (e.g., health center, counseling services...)?
   a. Is the ODS connected with any of these resources?
16. Are there any considerations that students with disabilities should know about regarding the admission process at the college?
17. Do you provide information about the graduation rate and/or the retention rate for students who are served by the ODS?
18. Are there provisions made for having to miss classes based on the nature of a particular disability or a medical condition?
19. Are substitutions available for particular required courses at the college if they are needed based on the nature of a disability (e.g., world language courses)?
20. Is there any additional information that you can share with me about the ODS at your college?

REFERENCES


MICHAEL URETSKY teaches in the College of Education at California State University, Stanislaus. He has been a secondary teacher, guidance counselor, enrichment specialist, and program coordinator. Michael has received the Joseph B. Whitehead Coca Cola Educator of Distinction Award and has presented at various educational conferences.

DONNA ANDREWS teaches in the College Education at California State University, Stanislaus. She has been a secondary math teacher and has received awards for her student-centered pedagogy. Donna has also worked as an Academic Skills Coordinator at St. Lawrence University (NY) helping students transition to college.