DISPEL THE MYTHS
When helping students with disabilities search for and apply to colleges, it’s important to address a number of misperceptions about what colleges do and don’t offer.

BY ELIZABETH C. HAMBLET

There are a number of myths surrounding the topic of students with disabilities applying for and attending college. You can help dispel these untruths by educating students with disabilities and their families about the reality of the college environment.

The first myth concerns the availability of services. Too many families believe competitive schools don’t have to provide disability accommodations because of their rigorous expectations. This pervasive myth may cause students who are gifted and have disabilities to narrow their choices unnecessarily. The truth is that all colleges, from community colleges through the Ivy League schools, have to provide certain basic adjustments, so students should not dismiss competitive colleges from consideration. While you educate families about the wide range of college choices available to students, make sure they also know that disability accommodations are provided for free, so they do not worry about paying for them.

You probably already know colleges don’t have separate admissions requirements for individuals with disabilities, but your families may not. This consistency in requirements is positive, in that students with disabilities don’t have to have any additional classes on their transcript or higher standardized test scores than do their peers without disabilities. For some families, it may be a surprise that the flip side of this is that colleges aren’t required to make adjustments to their admissions standards, meaning that students with disabilities generally have to meet the same admissions requirements for GPA, testing, etc. Some colleges may be flexible on this point, especially those that have special fee-for-service programs for students with learning disabilities (LD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This has real implications for you; if the high school is considering waiving certain courses for students with disabilities, such as foreign language or math classes, families need to be aware that students’
selection of colleges could be narrowed by such a choice. In addition to alerting families to this point, you’ll also want to dispel the persistent rumor that colleges have to accept a certain quota of students with disabilities.

There are other myths you can help dispel around the admissions process. Parents and students often don’t realize that nothing students submit with their application indicates they have a disability and utilized accommodations, not transcripts or SAT and ACT score reports. This leaves students to decide whether they want to disclose their disability in some way, either in an essay or the section where they can tell a little more about themselves. Students are neither expected nor obligated to do so in any way, and they should do whatever makes them feel comfortable. College admissions counselors’ opinions vary widely on whether or not students should disclose a disability. Some say absolutely not; some say it’s appropriate when students are applying to schools known to be disability-friendly (especially those offering fee-for-service programs). For those students who want the college to know but don’t feel comfortable disclosing it themselves, school counselors or teachers can include the information in a letter of recommendation. Remind students, however, that if they don’t want their teachers disclosing their disability in a recommendation letter, they should tell them this explicitly so a well-meaning adult doesn’t reveal something students wish to keep private.

As to whether they should disclose or not, my advice to students is this – if you disclose your disability in some way and are not accepted to the school you most wish to attend, can you live with it? If you will always wonder whether your disclosure was the reason your dream school rejected you, don’t do it. Some students have told me they wouldn’t want to attend a school that wouldn’t accept them because of a disability. If your students feel the same way, they should go ahead and disclose.

Aside from addressing the misconceptions surrounding availability of services and admissions policies, it is important to also educate your students about the way the disability services (DS) system works at college. A lot of misunderstandings surround this topic because families expect things to work the same way they do in K-12 schools.

You should start with the fact that even if students have said something about their disability in their application, that information is not shared with the DS office at most schools, except where students apply simultaneously to the college and the fee-for-service LD or ADHD program. Some families believe high schools send each college a list of students with disabilities who are enrolling there and that this will trigger DS to arrange accommodations for them. In fact, the only way for students to get access to disability accommodations and services is to apply for them.

The process is simple. Students generally have to complete an application with basic information, e.g., name, address on campus, etc. In most cases, they will have to state what accommodations they seek (e.g., extended time on tests), and they will also have to submit documentation of their disability. At some schools, the summary of performance document your school compiles will be sufficient for documentation. At a number of colleges, however, students with LD will find they have to submit copies of their most recent learning disabilities testing and that the testing has to have been conducted within a certain time frame. Students with ADHD will find that some schools, although not the majority of them, require students to have undergone testing that wasn’t required by the high school and that the school child study team doesn’t administer. I recommend that parents don’t get their student tested with these measures until the student is accepted by and decides to attend a school requiring them. In most cases, the expense and time spent will prove unnecessary.

What parents may find surprising is that students can choose not to apply for accommodations. Colleges can’t make them do this, so the option is theirs. It’s a good idea to address this head-on in a meeting with students and their parents during senior year. You can tell students that they possess the right to steer clear of DS, and DS will not come looking for them, but they must know that if they do poorly on any papers or exams without their accommodations, those grades will stay on their transcript. They have the right to make a choice, but they have to be prepared to live with the consequences of that choice. If they express a desire to shed their disability “label” when they get to college, assure them that the only people who will be informed about this will be the DS staff and the professors whose classes they take. Dispel the myth that colleges distribute a list of all students registered with DS to faculty and staff, and inform them that nothing on their college transcript will indicate their use of accommodations if they want to apply to graduate school.

Once they apply for services, students will find certain basic accommodations easy to obtain, such as extended time (usually 150 percent) for exams, permission to record lectures and note takers. Students may be offered access to technology they have not yet seen, such as

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For More Information

U.S. Department of Education Pamphlets:
For students: www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html
For parents: www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/parent-20070316.html
For high school professionals: www.ed.gov/print/about/offices/list/ocr/transitionguide.html
Auxiliary aid explanation: www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/auxaids.html
Document requirements: www.ldadvisory.com/reading_docs_hs
Special Olympics College Starter Guide: www.specialolympics.org/Sections/What_We_Do/5O-College.aspx
“smart pens” that allow them to take notes and record lectures simultaneously and software that reads their texts aloud. Items such as calculators and spellcheckers may be allowed for certain tests but not when those skills are actually being measured.

Students may find it hard to get approved for extended time for assignments, as students are expected to manage their time without this, and to get copies of professors’ notes or study guides, as colleges are not required to provide these. Even given my warnings here, I encourage students to apply for whatever accommodations they desire; they may be pleasantly surprised.

**Graduation Requirements**

One big area you should address is that of college graduation requirements. Families may mistakenly assume that colleges have to waive certain classes, particularly math and foreign language, for students with disabilities who cannot pass them. This isn’t true. Colleges aren’t legally obligated to make any changes to their requirements. If a college decides to make a change to its requirements for a student, it will typically require that student to take certain approved substitute courses to satisfy those requirements.

Students who have concerns about their ability to complete a particular college’s graduation requirements may be better off focusing their efforts on another college whose requirements they feel they can meet. The same is true when students choose a major; they should expect to complete all of the required courses.

Other misconceptions you should correct for families is the erroneous belief that colleges will have trained learning disabilities specialists on hand, and students with disabilities can get one-on-one tutoring with such a qualified professional. These are not services the law requires colleges to provide, and most do not. Most tutoring at colleges is done by undergraduate students. Some colleges hire disability specialists to work with their students, but students may only be allowed one appointment a week. At some schools the only access to specialists is through a fee-for-service program. Encourage students to make researching the available support part of their college research.

While students are in high school the focus for most families is on them achieving the highest possible GPA so they can get into college. This may shift the focus from the development of independent study and learning strategies to accommodations and modifications that keep GPAs high. As students enter middle or high school, you should introduce to parents and students the idea that college will require students to be very independent in their functioning and that certain accommodations may not be available. Especially make sure they are aware that modification of assignment length or type is not common at all. Encourage families to choose courses that challenge students so they develop the academic skills they will need at college. And even if you and the families agree that certain supportive accommodations are necessary when students start high school, make a long-term plan to help students learn time-management and study strategies and gradually remove accommodations by senior year so students will be confident they have the skills needed to be successful in college.

By sharing information with students and their parents, you give students with disabilities the best possible preparation for a successful college career. You can be creative about how you educate them. Consider inviting former students who are currently at college to speak to families about their experiences. Invite representatives from local colleges’ DS offices to speak about their procedures and services. Anything you can do to educate families can be a tremendous help to students with disabilities as they transition to college.

Elizabeth C. Hamblet is a learning consultant at Columbia University and the author of “7 Steps for Success: High School to College Transitions for Students With Disabilities,” published by the Council for Exceptional Children. She offers resources and advice on her website, LDadvisory.com, and can be reached through the contact link there or at echamblet@ldadvisory.com.