

Helping Students With Disabilities Transition to College

*21 Tips for Students With
LD and/or ADD/ADHD*

David J. Connor

Making the transition from high school to college poses challenges for most students. Moving from the secure regulated world of secondary education into an unfamiliar environment that requires greater independence, autonomy, and personal decision making can be a destabilizing experience. Managing this change can make students with disabilities feel even more anxious and overwhelmed. The 21 tips featured in this article are intended to help counselors, teachers, and parents support high school students with disabilities in preparing for this transition. By previewing these strategies, teachers and parents can increase student awareness of situations they will encounter, help them play an active role in making important decisions, and guide them toward a greater chance of success.

Increasing numbers of students with disabilities are pursuing postsecondary education. The number of students with learning disabilities (LD) attending college has more than tripled in the last 3 decades (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003). An estimated 23% of students with LD enroll in a 2-year college program, with 11% attending a 4-year institution (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). Similarly, 30% of students with attention deficit disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD) enroll in 2-year college programs, and 6% attend 4-year institutions (Wagner et al., 2005). However, the transition to a postsecondary education environment can make students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD feel anxious and overwhelmed (Cohen, 2004; Cohn, 1998; Lee & Jackson, 1992; Sandler, 2008). Only 28% of these students manage to graduate, which is approximately half of the graduation rate for students without disabilities (Gregg, 2009).

Such sobering statistics indicate the numerous difficulties that students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD face when transitioning to and negotiating the complex demands of college. College requires students to respond to an increase in the volume and complexity of academic work (Lindstrom, 2007); manage "standard" classes such as Freshman Composition (Clinton & Higbee, 2011; Hadley, 2007); learn largely via lecture format, despite the growth in technology-based options (Komarraju & Karau, 2008); meet second-language requirements (Madaus, 2003); study with professors whose support of students can be unpredictable (Ginsberg & Schulte, 2008); and maintain an acceptable grade point average (DaDeppo, 2009). Many students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD begin college unprepared to manage what might be the most significant

greater probability for success, teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents can ensure students address critical situations while they are still in high school and can make them aware of potential issues they might encounter in college and in the job market. Consider how you can use the following 21 tips to assist students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD to prepare for the transition to college.

1. Be Comfortable With the LD and/or ADD/ADHD Classification

Many students have negative associations with being labeled *disabled* and receiving special education services (Mooney, 2008). However, students who are able to shift this original disposition and "reframe" their understanding (Reiff, 2004, p. 185) come to see how LD and/or ADD/ADHD is not

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demand placed upon them: to shift from others leading their learning to students leading their own learning. Student success is dependent on students knowing the full range of supports available to them—from technology to personnel.

Students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD need to learn to be autonomous in their decision making while they are still in high school, so they will be able to use these skills when they enter college. The need for autonomy is best described in the words of a college student with LD: "It's not like high school. Most classes are so big nobody cares about you; they don't even know who you are. Nobody will say anything until they are ready to kick you out" (Trainin & Swanson, 2005, p. 271).

To help students play an active role in making important decisions for a

primarily an academic deficit, but rather an integral part of who they are and how they operate in the world (Mortimore & Crozier, 2006; Olney & Kim, 2001). To facilitate this, albeit a major undertaking, students can be part of a support group (Luna, 2003); seek an accomplished college student mentor with a similar disability through an organization such as Project Eye-to-Eye (<http://www.projecteyetoeeye.org/>), for encouragement and support; and learn about neurodiversity as a way of accepting how normal human variation is—instead of seeing differences as abnormal (Armstrong, 2010).

2. Acknowledge Strengths and Areas of Need

Teachers and parents can help guide students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD to identify the skills in which they are

Table 1. Laws That Ensure the Educational Rights of Students With Disabilities

Law	Ensures
Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2006) ^a	<p>K-12 school districts are required to provide a free and appropriate public education to all students with disabilities.</p> <p>Guarantees students with disabilities have the right to nondiscriminatory assessment, confidentiality, and due process.</p> <p>Individualized education programs (IEPs) can include accommodations and testing modifications.</p>
Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (2006)	<p>Colleges are required to make their programs accessible to qualified students with disabilities.</p> <p>Colleges are required to make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities that impact their ability to participate in college.</p> <p>If a college receives federal funds (regardless of whether it is public or private), it must be accessible to qualified students with disabilities. However, private schools are not held to the same level of requirements as public schools.</p>
ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA, 2009)	<p>The 1990 Americans With Disabilities Act prohibited discrimination against individuals with disabilities in a variety of settings, including any entity that received federal funds (i.e., colleges and universities). The ADAAA expanded the spectrum of disabilities that may be eligible for accommodations; its updated language also applied to Section 504, through a "conforming amendment."</p>

Note. ADA = Americans with Disabilities Act.

^aIDEA provisions terminate at high school graduation or at age 22, so students with disabilities cannot claim rights under this provision when in higher education.

proficient and the content areas where they excel. This information should be counterbalanced with self-knowledge of the skills and content areas in which they struggle (Milsom & Hartley, 2005). By using their proficient skills (e.g., organizing, asking questions, or thoroughly preparing) in classes where they might struggle with content, students can hone their abilities to self-assess, self-strategize, and problem solve—allowing them to self-manage.

For example, students who are visual learners but struggle in recalling voluminous amounts of information in a history class can make one-page concept maps with icons to help high-

light the importance of and organize information, creating effective study aides. This can be done free-hand or by using technology (Mortimore & Crozier, 2006), including Internet-based programs such as <https://bubbl.us/>, designed to help students brainstorm, or readily available organizers such as those at <http://my.hrw.com/nsmedia/intgos/html/igo.htm>. In addition, students can research their own learning styles (<http://members.shaw.ca/mdde615/lrnstysquiz7.htm>) and multiple intelligence affinities (<http://www.literacyworks.org/mi/assessment/findyourstrengths.html>) with a view to improving their learning process.

3. Learn About the College Disability Services Office

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (2006) ensured the civil rights of people with disabilities. As part of that legislation, all colleges that receive any type of federal funding are required by law to have disability services on campus for students with disabilities (see Table 1). A student's request for accommodations and support services is verified by this office, which then approves relevant support from a range of possibilities (e.g., alternative testing arrangements, priority registration, assistive technology services, readers, note takers, sign language interpreters). The campus disability services office also prepares a document notifying professors of accommodations required by the student (without disclosing the specific disability)—although it is often the student's responsibility to give the information to the professor.

4. Practice Making Decisions

A central goal of education for all individuals, including those with LD and/or ADD/ADHD, is to develop autonomy (Hadley, 2007). Students should have opportunities to practice their decision-making skills consistently throughout high school and in different settings (i.e., home and community). Students can ponder hypothetical scenarios about commonplace problematic situations pertaining to the academic, social, and financial realms of college life. Simple decision-making strategies may include considering such things as

- ✓ The pros and cons of selecting a course load.
- ✓ Ramifications of different decisions pertaining to personal budgeting.
- ✓ Prioritizing choices in social situations.
- ✓ Learning to make a "Plan B."

In problem solving around these scenarios, students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD can come to recognize the highly personal nature of how individuals respond to the demands of college (Troiano, 2003).

5. Read "College Success Stories"

Students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD are experts on their own lives. Several have survived college and shared their experiences in the form of "how-to" books that are informative, useful, and decidedly from an "insider's" point of view (Sandler, 2008; see Table 2). This peer-to-peer approach is often written in an engaging manner and infused with the right amount of empathy, wit, and know-how, frequently focusing upon serious situations that are cast in humorous ways to help keep things in perspective (Mooney & Cole, 2000). Students with significant difficulties in reading can get these books on tape (Nelson & Lignugaris-Kraft, 1989) or use a text-to-speech program.

6. Know Student Rights Before Attending College

Students who have documented accommodations throughout their earlier school years can usually receive testing accommodations when taking college entrance exams such as the SAT or the ACT (Beale, 2005). These same accommodations can be secured in general at postsecondary institutions, through the campus disability services office. Students should be aware that rights to accommodation during any testing, however, does not mean diminution of their own responsibilities to prepare for the test.

7. Know Student Responsibilities Before Attending College

With greater autonomy comes increased self-responsibility. Individuals with LD and/or ADD/ADHD intending to go to college should know about the federal regulations that affect them, including what kind of assistance they personally require (the more specific, the better)—and be able to provide documentation to substantiate their claim (Beale, 2005). The burden of proof is on the student to have his or her disability verified (Madaus & Shaw, 2006). Students should maintain information throughout high school on their school-based assessments and be prepared to share it with the campus

Table 2. College "Success Stories"

Jonathan Mooney and David Cole's <i>Learning Outside the Lines: Two Ivy League Students with Learning Disabilities and ADHD Give You the Tools for Academic Success and Educational Revolution</i> (2000)	Two students who graduated top of their class from Brown University tell their tales and give advice on ways to maximize control over the educational experience and celebrate human diversity.
Michael Sandler's <i>College Confidence with ADD: The Ultimate Success Manual for ADD Students, from Applying to Academics, Preparation to Social Success and Everything Else You Need to Know</i> (2008)	A comprehensive, user-friendly book designed in "bite-size chunks" that addresses how to succeed in all aspects of college and in life.
Christopher Lee and Rosemary Jackson's <i>Faking It: A Look into the Mind of a Creative Learner</i> (1992)	The story of one boy's frustration with school experiences in which he learned to "get by," how they did not prepare him for college, and what he had to do to succeed there.
Pano Rodis, Andrew Garrod, and Lynn Boscardin's <i>Learning Disabilities and Life Stories</i> (2001)	The editors feature 13 autobiographical chapters of college students with LD and/or ADD. Each person shares their highly personal account of how they learn has impacted their lives—and what they do to be successful in college.

disability services office. Once this information is shared, students will be notified of their status (i.e. "officially" recognized as having a disability), the accommodations they are entitled to, and possible optional services that exist at the college, such as access to a writing center, priority to quiet areas of the library, and so on.

8. Take a College Course While in High School

Taking a college class as part of a high school-college collaboration (Foley, 2006; see University of Pittsburgh, 2006, for example) permits students to gauge the difference between typical high school work and expected levels of college work, helping them prepare to meet increased standards. Many universities extend their facilities so that high school students can take a class online or attend specific sessions on campus. A student with LD in reading comprehension who is a whiz in mathematics can find a course to his or her liking, as can an entrepreneurial-

minded student with ADD/ADHD who can take a class in business. Such school-to-college links may influence high school students in their choice of selecting the college they have attended part-time, especially if they have developed personal contact with supportive staff and faculty there.

9. Participate in Precollege Academies

High school students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD who visit college campuses describe their experiences as valuable to understanding the academic differences between both settings (Kato, Nulty, Olszewski, Doolittle, & Flannery, 2006). A visit can consist of an intensive, day-long schedule including time for students with individualized education programs (IEP) to meet with personnel from the disability services office. Students should align any additional support services (e.g., vocational rehabilitation) with other key college contacts and offices. Another option is for school faculty or parents

Table 3. Success Skills for College

Time management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plot assignments, tests, and other commitments on paper or electronic organizer to see the long-term schedule “at a glance.” • Schedule time to study every week, and before midterms and finals. Err on the side of overbudgeting time; if you end up not needing it then it’s a reward. • Create a daily schedule based on the fluctuating demands of classes. • Prioritize “to-do” items by placing them on an A-list, B-list, or C-list. • “Self-check-in” at different times throughout the day (e.g., make a mental list of what needs to be done while taking a shower). • Learn to be comfortable in saying “no” to social invitations that conflict with your study plans.
Writing papers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget plenty of time. • Research sources, make hard copies, and write notes on them. • Use prewriting activities to explore ideas about what you want to say. • Write an outline, including the estimated number of pages for each section. Share this with your professor. • Write a rough draft (or two) before a final version. • Utilize support services available from the campus writing center and departmental peer tutors.
Test taking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quickly review the entire test before answering anything; make notes on anything you may forget. • Budget time for each section, as well as some at the end to review your work. • Read directions carefully; circle or underline exactly what is being asked. • Answer the easiest questions or sections first. • Answer all questions, unless you are penalized for wrong answers.
Reducing stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use lists to keep organized, and take pleasure in crossing off completed items. • Manage anxiety as best you can; use relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, self-affirmations, etc. • Focus on the possible positive outcomes of a situation; do not dwell on negative thoughts. • Cultivate healthy habits of eating and exercise. • Use visualization techniques to temporarily imagine being in a preferable place. • Balance study with recreational “rewards” such as meeting friends for coffee or going to the movies.

to arrange a visit for students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD to visit freshman college classrooms as early in their high school career as possible, with follow-up discussions with students and faculty on campus in areas of interest.

10. Develop Essential Skills

Study skills taught and practiced in high school help prepare students for the increased rigor of college (Connor & Lagares, 2007). Explicitly teaching students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD in high school to organize when and how to complete assignments, as well as how to manage time, can provide a strong foundation for using these skills in college (see Table 3; <http://www.academictips.org>; Lagares & Connor, 2009). These skills should be taught explicitly across content-area classes. For example, a student can prepare for assignments by blocking out time on a calendar several days before the due date (depending upon the length of assignment) and by minimizing or eliminating social engagements. In preparing for an assignment, students can reduce distractions in their study environment by seeking an alternative environment (such as a quiet space in the library), selecting appropriate documents beforehand, and outlining the response in a bulleted format before writing a first draft.

11. Align Study Skills to Specific Classes

Although it is useful for students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD to learn a variety of strategies, it is more important for them to develop the ability of matching the best strategy to a specific assignment. Students who are able to actively determine what they need to do and why they need to do it are inclined to develop a strong sense of autonomy (Allsopp, Minskoff, & Bolt, 2005). For example, a student who is easily distracted in classes involving a lot of note-taking can employ a variety of strategies (e.g., I SWAM, PP 123, and TASSEL; see Table 4).

Table 4. Strategies for Note-Taking in Classes With Dense Content

Strategy Acronym	Components	Use
I SWAM	I - INTEGRATE previous notes and readings S - SIT close to the teacher W - WRITE down everything A - ANALYZE verbal, nonverbal, and body language M - MONITOR for attention	To help take notes when the instructor talks fast.
PP 123	P - PREPARE to take notes P - PLAY the tape in small sections 1 - Listen . . . for meaning 2 - Listen . . . and take notes 3 - Listen . . . and review	To help take notes from a taped lecture.
TASSEL	T - TRY not to doodle while taking notes A - ARRIVE at each class prepared S - SIT near the front of the classroom S - SIT away from friends E - END daydreaming L - LOOK at the teacher	To help focus and reduce distraction when taking notes.

Note. Adapted with permission from the Learning Toolbox (<http://coe.jmu.edu/LearningToolbox/notetaking.html>). The Learning Toolbox has descriptions of each of these strategies, as well as other note-taking approaches.

12. Make Connections Among Classes

Just as strategies can be selected to match a specified task, they can also be generalized among courses. Once acclimatized to the content and format

13. Utilize Peer Tutor Services

The campus disability services office might offer the possibility of a peer tutor on a weekly basis for students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD, as do some academic departments.

14. Use Informal Peer Mentors

College is a place to develop friendships with diverse people. Students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD can cultivate friendships with a peer who understands their struggles in certain academic areas in high school or in the community. Informal peer mentors have often proven valuable to students with LD and/or ADD in discussing and reinforcing aspects of various classes (Kirby et al., 2008). Note that this can be a reciprocal arrangement in that students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD who excel in different areas—academics, sports, or arts—can in turn mentor their peers. In college, counselors (e.g., from the school's counseling services office, academic advisors, or disability services) can play an important role in introducing more experienced students who can serve as peer mentors.

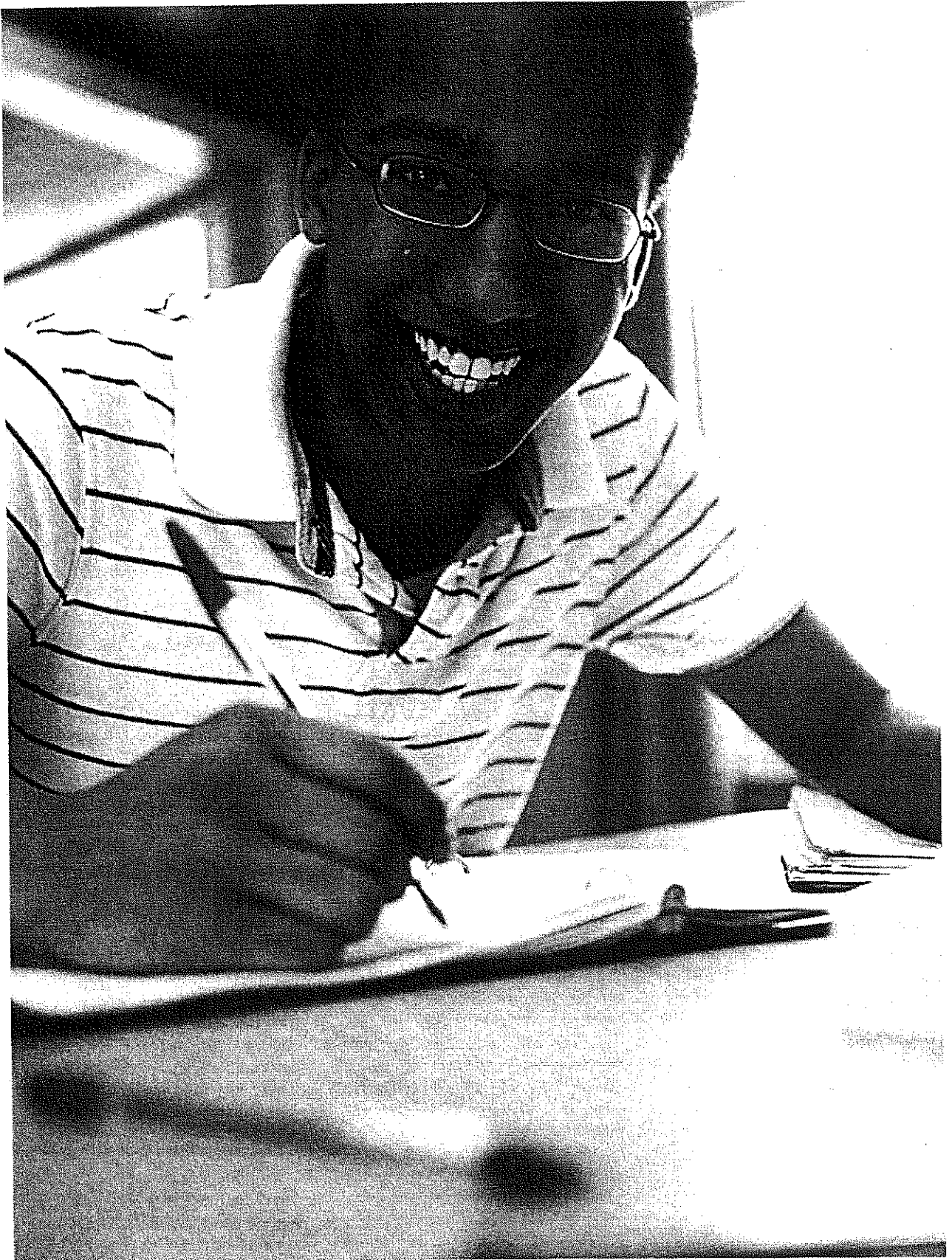
In learning to prepare for tests by blocking time, creating a review plan, and using memory-based strategies for all courses, students cultivate good study habits that increase the likelihood of academic success.

of all their classes, students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD can make connections to develop a set of preferred strategies to use with most of their classes. For example, time management and test-taking strategies can be used in every course (Kirby, Silvestri, Allingham, Parrila, & LaFave, 2008). In learning to prepare for tests by blocking time, creating a review plan, and using memory-based strategies for all courses, students cultivate good study habits that increase the likelihood of academic success.

However, it is important to note that the most effective approach to peer tutoring is for students with disabilities to actively play a collaborative role in developing strategies guided by the tutor to help them strategize (Butler, Elaschuk, & Poole, 2000). For example, a student who struggles to determine what is important in assigned readings should specifically identify this area to work on with his or her tutor, actively describing what methods have been successful and unsuccessful to date.

15. Access Class Notes

Many students have difficulty taking detailed notes, and there are various ways to ameliorate this, including using a tape recorder, accessing notes



from a note-taker, sharing or reviewing notes with trusted peers, or requesting a copy of the professor's notes (Hadley, 2007). The majority of universities provide ongoing information and professional development for faculty members to ensure that they know why and how to accommodate students with disabilities (Salzberg, Hardman, Price, & Morgan, 2002). It is worth mentioning, however, that although accommodations are legally guaranteed, some individual professors still are resistant providing them—causing students to either challenge professors or reluctantly accept the terms (Ryan, 2007). It is useful to interpret a challenging situation with a professor as an opportunity to problem solve. Despite increased awareness and professional development, some professors often do not know how to support students with disabilities. By suggesting solutions such as the professor preposting materials on the class web page one day in advance, students can help guide faculty to understand ways of working together to ensure maximum access to the curriculum. Further, explaining legal accommodations such as making an audio presentation that is the equivalent in content to written work expected in class, students help guide faculty to understand accommodations required of them. If all good-faith attempts fail, students should discuss the situation with the campus disability services office.

16. Evaluate a Professor Before Taking the Class

Students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD may feel more anxious than their peers without disabilities when interacting with a professor and feel unsure of how that professor will respond to a request for accommodations. However, there are several ways to find out who are the most understanding and supportive professors. The first option is to have a direct conversation with the possible professors and ascertain the level of receptivity toward students with disabilities in their classes. Another way is to consult with the campus disability services office, as

they will know which professors have been deemed particularly receptive toward students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD and which have not (Cornett-DeVito & Worley, 2005). Another way to find out more about professors is simply being part of a student network that informs each other of allies and obstacles. Additionally, there are many web pages in public domains that share information about professors and their practices. Generally speaking, this suggestion is not meant to infer that students with disabilities seek out less rigorous courses than their peers, but rather gauge the degree of understanding particular professors may hold toward them.

17. Use the Benefits of Technology

Methods of teaching and learning within college have changed significantly due to the increased use of technology. Students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD can choose the types of classes they prefer, including online and hybrid courses that allow students to fulfill class assignments asynchronously. Utilizing assistive technology such as screen readers can help students to process large quantities of text in auditory form (Hecker, Burns, Elkind, Elkind, & Katz, 2002). Whether it is using a digital tape recorder, replaying podcasts, or maintaining a digital organizer, students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD have options to help them organize and manage their work.

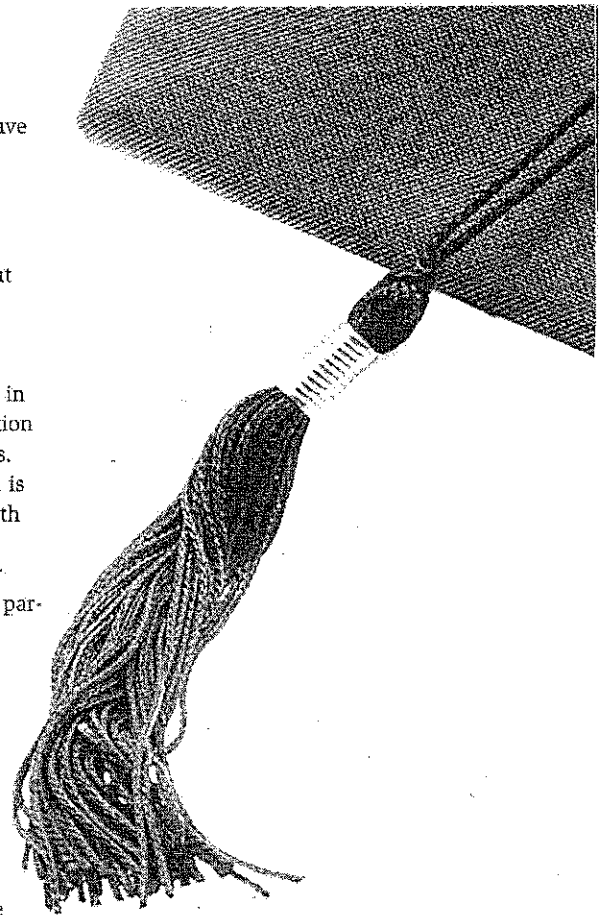
18. Consider the Benefits of Self-Disclosure

It is important for students to know that their rights in college include the right not to reveal their disability to any faculty or staff member—and some students believe it beneficial to consciously shed a label that makes them uncomfortable. However, this strategy can prove to be counterproductive if students try to go it alone only to discover late in the semester that, in order to succeed in classes, they actually do need accommodations. Individuals with LD and/or ADD/ADHD can regis-

ter with the campus disability services office at any time during their college career. However, in general, there is a greater likelihood of success if students self-identify early in their college careers (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Students who feel they cannot cope with their workload can meet with a counselor to strategize how to better manage the demands of college (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). All students should be aware of the college student code of conduct for clear delineations of their rights and responsibilities.

19. Take Responsibility for One's Own Education

Once registered, it is vital for students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD to maintain an ongoing relationship with the campus disability services office; the advisers and counselors employed in these offices are often important advocates and allies. They can assist in many ways, including advising about courses, facilitating preferential registration, and resolving problems with professors (Durodoye, Combes, & Bryant, 2004). Students should make



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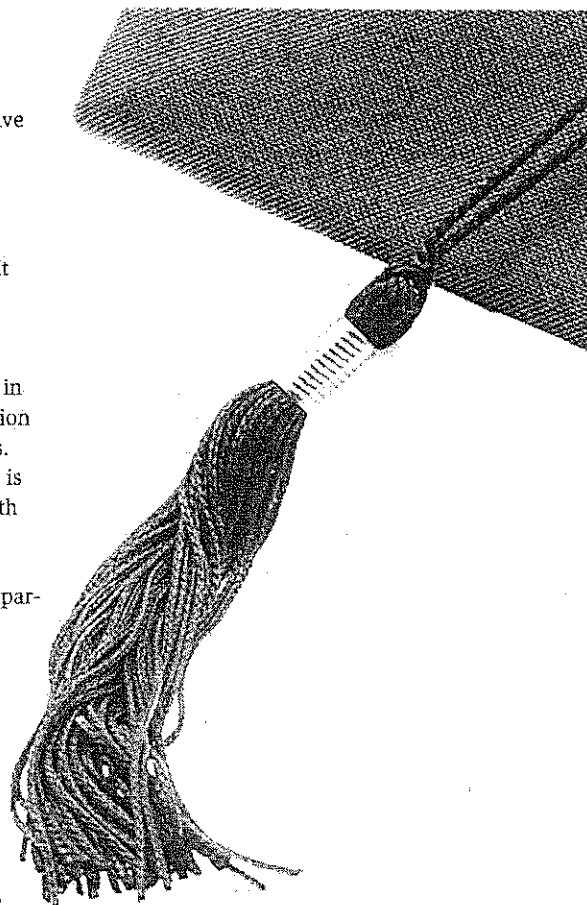
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an appointment in person with the coordinator of the campus disability services office, and build a personal relationship with those who could be their biggest advocates as challenges arise over time (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

20. Cultivate Individual Talent

College is a place for students to grow in many ways, including cultivating abilities and talents (Heiman, 2006). Often, the emphasis on the "dis" in disability can overshadow what a student with LD and/or ADD/ADHD can do. It becomes imperative, therefore, that students continue to nurture their talents and gifts, and receive recognition and further encouragement. After all, it is highly likely that a student's talent will significantly influence that student's choice of job (Levine, 2002). So, whether it is becoming captain of the swim team and managing people

the students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD who will "come after" (Mooney & Cole, 2000; Sandler, 2008).

Final Thoughts

This list of 21 suggestions to help students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD transition into college is far from exhaustive. It does, however, open the door to begin important discussions about the many aspects involved in this transition. In contemplating these points, students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD can begin to strategize for their own success. Given the difference in general opportunities and the quality of life that a college education affords, it is incumbent on all of us to support college students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD to lessen their struggles and help them ultimately succeed in college (Hamblet, 2011).

Although students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD constitute a sizable pro-

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(Lee & Jackson, 1992), cultivating empathic skills that formed the basis of a career in counseling (Schmitt, 1994), or developing advocacy skills and becoming a public speaker (Mooney, 2008), everyone should nurture and develop individual strengths.

21. Self-Advocate

Students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD who have a greater likelihood of succeeding in college are those who exhibit a strong sense of self-acceptance—including being sufficiently comfortable in sharing their disability status with college staff and faculty. The challenge is to develop specific attributes of being proactive, assertive, and self-determined, as these will serve students well in their pursuit of autonomy and the increased likelihood of graduation (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Further, experiences in school and college can serve as the basis for general advocacy for

portion of all students with disabilities who attend college, these tips certainly are applicable for counseling with students on the autism spectrum, students with intellectual disability, and those with emotional or behavioral challenges. Being comfortable with one's disability, registering with the campus disability services office, utilizing resources available, being proactive in organizing a schedule of classes, and employing customized strategies that help academic success are suggestions relevant to all students with disabilities. Providing students with disabilities with these critical strategies is essential to ensuring their success in college and beyond—in life.

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