



The thought of your child starting college is daunting. But like many things in life, preparation is the key to success.



How to Select the Right College

by Fran Parker, Ph.D.

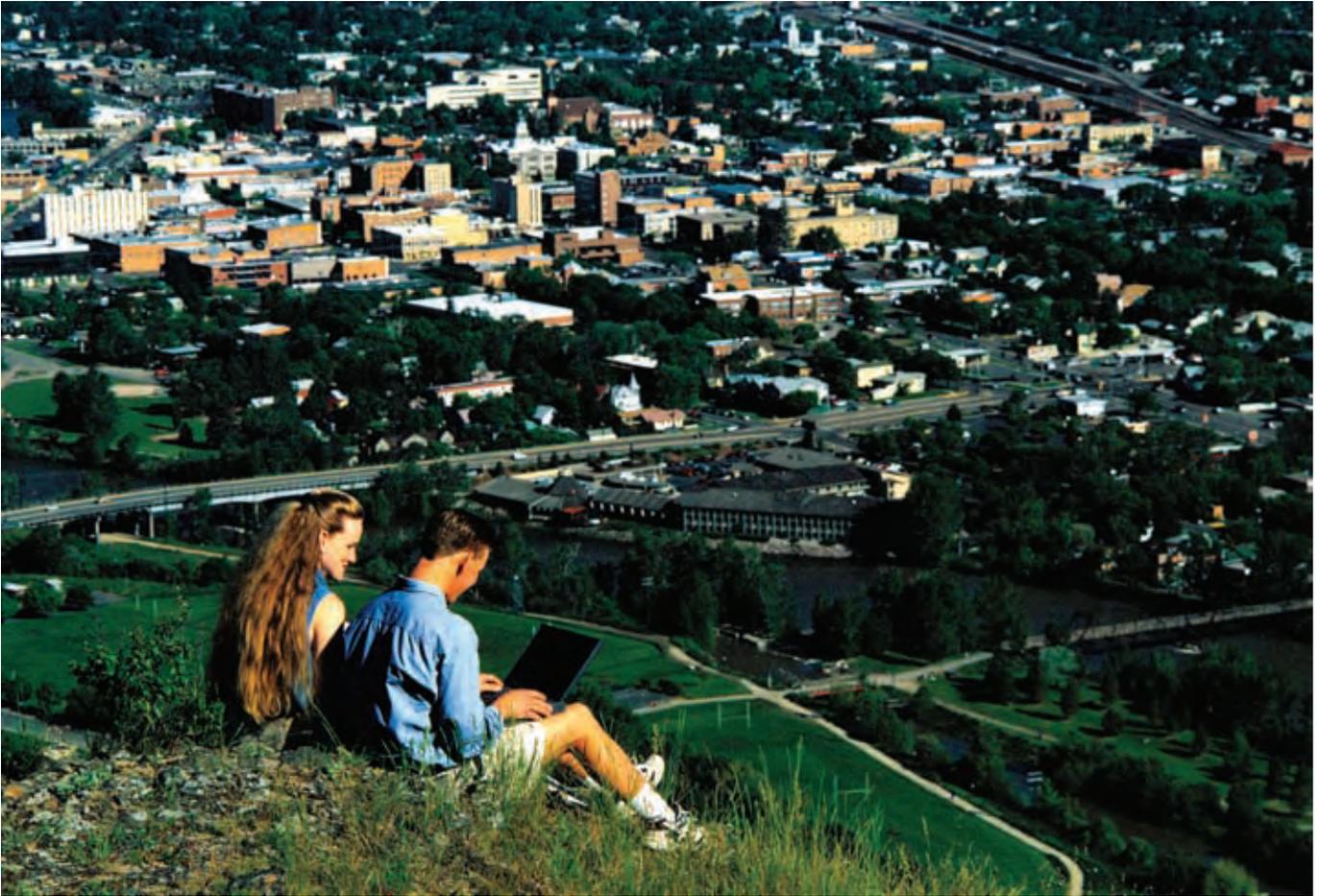
THE THOUGHT OF YOUR CHILD STARTING COLLEGE is daunting enough for most parents. However, if you have a child with AD/HD or other learning disabilities, the challenge of finding the right college to meet these special needs can seem almost overwhelming. But like many things in life, preparation is the key to success.

Making the Transition to College

It is imperative that both the parent and teen be realistic about the teen's readiness to leave home. Questions to ask include:

- Can my teen anchor and structure herself in an environment filled with social and emotional distractions?
- Will he be able to handle the academic and social demands of college?
- Will she be able to adapt to all of the changes involved without having a meltdown?
- Will he be able to avoid alcohol and substance use?
- Does she understand how AD/HD impacts her learning and lifestyle?
- What are his strengths and weaknesses?

Part of preparing for this transition involves meeting with the high school counselor and therapist to discuss college options, the questions listed above, and whether your student is realistically prepared for the independence and challenges of college life. By the junior year of high school, a teen should begin doing laundry and learning how to budget money. In addition, a part-time job can help bolster self-esteem and teach the use of money and time management techniques by making priority lists and using a daily



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planner. These steps are crucial to learning the life skills of establishing routines and a system of self-regulation.

It is essential that the teen accept his or her AD/HD. The more the student knows and understands about the disorder, the better equipped he or she will be to educate others about it and self-advocate in college. Parents and teens can also anticipate that college will take longer than four years. For students with AD/HD to be successful at college, they need to:

- be willing to ask for help;
- be comfortable describing the disability and advocating for needed services;
- be willing to sit at the front of the class;
- be willing to work longer and harder;
- use medication as prescribed;
- understand the compensatory skills required for learning;
- develop adaptive study, coping and living skills with help from the counseling center, academic support services and an AD/HD coach; and
- focus on the goal of consistency, persistence and follow-through in developing structure with a plan for success.

The College Search

As the parent of a child with AD/HD, I began doing research during my son's junior year of high school. I focused on the type of academic and social environment that would best fit his individual needs and AD/HD. I looked for structured academic support services that offered seminars on study strategies, time management and organizational skills, and encouraged the use of student mentors, supplemental instruction, extensive content tutoring services, and writing and math labs. In my search I discovered that **academic support services** were available to all students, which alleviated the stigma in seeking help. There were also **disability offices** that worked in conjunction with academic support services that were only available to students with documented disabilities. These two services quickly became my main focus.

An excellent resource that I used was *The K&W Guide to Colleges: For Students with Learning Disabilities or ADD* (6th edition) 2002 by Marybeth Kravets and Imy Wax. The book is divided into three different levels of academic support, from the most highly structured to services with reasonable accommodations. The book describes the learning disability program and services

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offered at each college listed. It provides the director's name and the phone number/e-mail address of the contact person. As I contacted the different disability directors and college admissions counselors, I developed a specific priority/criteria list.

For my son who has AD/HD the list included:

- a small college of 2,300 students or less with a smaller classroom environment and the opportunity to interact directly with the professors and get personal attention and feedback;
- a college location with easy access to a safe city;
- a high percentage of students living on campus;
- no Greek system (fraternities or sororities);
- waivers and course substitutions for a foreign language;
- extensive and unlimited academic support services;
- an advisor connected to the disability office to oversee the academic program and monitor progress;
- flexibility of the college with reasonable accommodations for students with AD/HD;
- a mandatory freshman transition to college class;
- a full-time learning specialist knowledgeable about AD/HD and LD to assist with and coordinate services;
- extracurricular activities—particularly radio, theater, newspaper, athletics and intramural sports;
- religious organizations on campus; and
- an adult mentor who is a graduate of the college and available to be a support person to out-of-state students.

There are two other guidebooks that I found to be useful in this search process: *The Best 331 Colleges: 2002 Edition* (Princeton Review) and *The Insider's Guide to the Colleges 2002* (The Staff of the Yale Daily News). These books describe the learning and social environments of the colleges. They provide information about the types of students on campus and what they think about the college scene, both socially and academically. They talk about how approachable the professors are and the ambience of the campus. I also found it useful to network with other parents of students with AD/HD and learning disabilities to collect more information. Educational consultants who specialize in colleges for students with AD/HD and LD are available through the Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA).

The Application Process and College Campus Visits

Through the sources I cited, we applied to nine colleges that were possibilities. All of these small colleges used the common application, which simplified the

Transitioning from High School to College

The transition from high school to college brings new freedoms and responsibilities. Are you prepared?

Academic Transition

- Know your diagnosis and learning disability
- Know your skill levels in reading, writing and math
- Know what accommodations you need
- Provide written documentation of your disability with your application

Social Transition

- Causes some freshmen to lose focus and fail college courses
- Use the skills and foundation learned from family members, teachers, and others to make wise choices
- Balance your social life and academic responsibilities

Achieving Independence

- Notice what adults do for you at home and school and learn to do it for yourself
- Take an inventory of your life skills. Start practicing these important skills before you leave home
- Know the names of the over-the-counter medications you take
- Know how to clean a bathroom and the supplies you'll need
- Know how to do laundry
- Know how to make your own doctors' appointments. ■

Information courtesy of Betsy StoutMorrill, director of admissions for Beacon College, and Stephanie Knight, admissions counselor for Beacon College.

process. My son took the SATs with extended time. The high school counselor had to send in the AD/HD documentation with a letter requesting the extended time. An important part of the application was the personal statement. My son closed his essay with this statement, "In having ADD, I accept that I need to apply myself longer and harder than my classmates do. I will continue to work hard to succeed at college."

We visited six of the colleges that were the highest on our list. After interviews with the admissions offices, we had a student-led tour of the campus and asked questions about the academics and social life at each college. As a part of the decision-making process, my son attended classes at these colleges and ate in the cafeteria among the students. As parents, we asked the admissions office and students about alcohol use and drugs on campus. Most of the colleges had substance free dorms where students can choose to live.

We interviewed all of the disability directors/coordinators at the different colleges and they varied in experience, position, credentials, availability and

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services offered. I prepared a list of questions specific to my son's learning style. It is essential to be able to articulate the nature of the AD/HD disability and describe the services that helped in high school. Remember to bring the 504 Plan or IEP with you. Ask how the faculty responds to students with learning differences. Find out the documentation required for registration with the disability office. Learn about the college's specific services and the procedures involved for students to obtain what they need to work at their optimal potential. Regular contact with the learning specialist or a student mentor can help the student avoid the procrastination trap and is definitely an important consideration.

The Final Selection

The college my son ultimately chose was Goucher College in Maryland. Our final selection was based on the disability director's knowledge of AD/HD and her accessibility. She held an Ed.D. from Johns Hopkins University and as a learning specialist, would also

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be our son's advisor. Her approach was straightforward and she told our son what was involved in the transition to college for a student with AD/HD. She emphasized the need to self-advocate, ask for help, and she explained all of the resources available to him if he pursued the academic and skills assistance. She warned that he should not wait until a crisis at the end of the semester to request services. Due to his language processing disability, a foreign language was

offered on a pass/fail basis with the option to waive this prerequisite with a culture class substitute. (He opted for the waiver second semester with Anthropology as the course substitution.) I am able to touch base with his advisor as needed, which I have done just once. The college turned out to be the right fit based on his academic success, ability to balance a productive, active campus life, and his amazing overall emotional growth and maturity.

Know Your Rights

The disability coordinator at the college level is mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 to provide reasonable accommodations for students who have AD/HD or LD. The law requires an institution of higher education to provide effective, reasonable accommodations. The ADA is enforced by the U.S. Dept. of Justice and applies to all public and private colleges or universities. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 applies to all public and private colleges that receive federal subsidies or grants for research and financial aid. Section 504 prohibits discrimination on the basis of a disability. To be called a disability, the impairment has to substantially limit a

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major life activity such as learning. AD/HD reflects impairment in social and/or academic functioning. Both ADA and Section 504 require documentation that is current within a three-year period of psycho-educational testing and/or a clinical diagnostic report.

The higher rated colleges require both testing and a report. Such documentation ensures that colleges provide appropriate accommodations. A student (or parent) can request that his/her high school update the assessment to comply with the college policy. A student with AD/HD and/or LD may require the following accommodations based on the documentation and what is interpreted as reasonable by the university:

- a reduced courseload
- extended time to complete tests and assignments
- a note-taker
- course substitution, particularly with math and/or foreign language
- waivers or pass/fail options
- a quiet testing room

- an alternate format for taking tests if required
- tutoring and assistive technology
- clarification or further explanation on assignments, tests or new concepts
- books on tape, and
- the option to tape-record classes

If a professor fails to agree to the recommendations or neglects to provide them, then the student must promptly notify the director of the disability office.

Alternatives to College

Many teens need time after high school to mature and acquire life skills before going away to a four-year, unstructured college environment. Teens with AD/HD tend to lag behind their peers socially and emotionally. Vocational Rehabilitation Services offers vocational counseling, evaluations, training and job placement assistance. It is a program for students with AD/HD who may need vocational guidance but are not planning to attend college.

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Transitional Colleges/Life Skills Programs

One or two years at a transitional college can help prepare a student to enter a four-year college. One is Louisburg College in North Carolina and another is Landmark College in Vermont. Both schools help students with AD/HD and learning disabilities develop study skills and strategies, time management skills, organizational skills and critical thinking. They also provide assistance with self-regulation.

The students receive individual attention from the faculty, attend very small classes, and can explore their individual learning styles and focus on self-advocacy. In the book, *Learning Outside the Lines: Two Ivy League Students with Learning Disabilities and AD/HD Give You the Tools for Academic Success and Educational Revolution*, Jonathan Mooney and David Cole teach students how to take charge of their education, how to learn and provide the “tools” to be successful. Cole and Mooney demonstrate that acquiring learning skills enhances life skills. Cole went to Landmark and Mooney attended a similar type of college before transferring to Brown University, an Ivy League college, where they both were successful.

Equipped with the proper information and preparation, the transition from high school to college or from college to college need not seem like an insurmountable challenge. Planning and research provide a foundation for selecting an environment where your student can flourish. ■

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Resources

www.collegeispossible.com

www.sparknotes.com

www.review.com

www.petersons.com

www.collegeboard.com

www.educationalconsulting.org

www.commonapp.org

www.collegeapps.about.com

Independent Educational Consultants Association

(703) 591-4850

www.educationalconsulting.org

HEATH Resource Center

(800) 544-3284

www.heath.gwu.edu

National clearinghouse for disability resources available at the postsecondary educational level

Transitional Colleges and Programs

Louisburg College in North Carolina

(800) 775-0208

www.louisburg.edu

Landmark College in Vermont

(802) 387-6718

www.landmark.edu

The following life skill transitional programs allow a student to attend a community college, vocational school or a four-year college, complete high school credits or earn a GED:

Benchmark (California)

(800) 474-4848

www.benchmarkeducation.net

Assists young adults “at risk” in the world of education, work, health (physical and emotional) and independence.

Echo Springs (Idaho)

(208) 267-1111

Provides guidance towards acquiring skills for autonomy and productivity.

College Living Experience (Florida)

(800) 486-5058

Offers a 12-month, comprehensive, independent living curriculum.

Aimhouse (Colorado)

www.aimhouse.com

Offers a supportive, positively-structured environment with individual and group therapy.

New Lifestyles (Virginia)

(540) 722-4521

www.newlifestyles.net

Provides academic, therapeutic and career support with coaching.

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