



College-Level Accommodations

by Lynda J. Katz, Ph.D.

Just as it was the student's responsibility to disclose his or her AD/HD and to provide documentation, it will also be the student's responsibility to access the necessary services.

STUDENTS WITH AD/HD and parents of children who have been diagnosed with AD/HD during their elementary and high school years have come to expect a certain level of cooperation from their school systems. At times that includes proactive support around the need for certain accommodations in the academic setting. Whether provided through a 504 plan or an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), these accommodations are mandated by law and become part of the school experience. Elementary and secondary schools are responsible for identifying and documenting the presence of a disability as covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504. If the disability interferes with academic progress, the school system is required to make reasonable accommodations for the student.

This is not the same scenario one encounters at the post-secondary (college or university) level. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, individuals with disabilities, including AD/HD, are guaranteed certain protections and rights to equal access to programs and services. But in order to access these rights, the prospective student with AD/HD and/or a learning disability must present documentation that the disability "substantially" limits some major life activity including learning. It is the responsibility of the student, not

the institution, to identify himself or herself to the college or university and provide appropriate documentation of the disability if the student would like to receive special services and/or reasonable accommodations.

Documentation

The Consortium on AD/HD Documentation, which is made up of testing, admissions and university professors, developed a series of standard criteria for documenting AD/HD that could be used by post-second-

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ary personnel, licensing and testing agencies, and consumers who required documentation to determine appropriate accommodations for individuals with AD/HD. Those criteria have subsequently been adopted by the Education Testing Service (ETS) and the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) in the Policy Statement for Documentation of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Adolescents and Adults. As a result, all colleges and universities providing special services to students adhere to that criteria and thus require that the documentation of prospective students with AD/HD meet those criteria. The complete set of standards, revised in 1999, can be found on the ETS website (www.ets.org/disability/adhdplcy.html). The basic requirements for documentation are as follows:

- A qualified professional must conduct the evaluation.
- Documentation must be current.
- Documentation must be comprehensive and include:
 - Evidence of early impairment
 - Evidence of current impairment
 - Alternative diagnoses or explanations ruled out
 - Relevant testing results
 - DSM–IV criteria identified
 - Documentation identifying a specific diagnosis
 - An interpretive summary
- Each accommodation recommended by the evaluator must include a rationale.

A few points will need some clarification. First,

evidence of “early impairment” is based on criteria contained in the DSM–IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association, 1994). While a formal diagnosis may not have been made during the early school years, various symptoms or behaviors may still be identified in the student’s history to help establish “early impairment.” These may include excessive daydreaming, a high degree of distractibility, excessive procrastination, work incompleteness, failure to meet deadlines, and various other behaviors that may have had a negative impact on academic performance. Obviously, evidence of current impairment may have a similar picture or be even more severe as the cognitive demands made on the brain’s executive functions increase only further in high school, in college and beyond.

Documentation of the current impact of disability requires that a diagnostic evaluation has been completed within the past three years. Exceptions to this can be made if the evaluation is comprehensive and applicable to the current or anticipated setting in which the request for accommodations is to be made. However, in general, IEPs or 504 plans are not acceptable since they do not meet the criteria set forth in the standards for colleges and universities.

The presence of a diagnostic interview presents some problems with respect to confidentiality and the need for accommodations. For example, if there are certain medical or psychological issues in the past that are no longer of concern, then their inclusion in the report is a matter of discussion between the professional conducting the evaluation and the student/parent (in the case of a minor). However, treatments for the condition for which the accommodation(s) is requested and any other conditions (e.g., diabetes mellitus, sleep disorder, asthma) that are currently present and may impact academic performance are relevant to the diagnostic process.

The standards make clear that the assessment of the individual must do more than establish a diagnosis of AD/HD. They must also demonstrate the current impact of AD/HD on an individual’s ability to function in an academic setting and take standardized tests. In other words, a medical doctor’s statement that a student has AD/HD and is treated with medication is not sufficient to establish the need for reasonable accommodations. Appendix C, “Assessing Adolescents and Adults with AD/HD,” from the Policy Statement on Documentation is also available on the ETS website and offers a list of acceptable and commonly administered psychometric measures.



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Reasonable Accommodations

Once a disorder has been documented as causing substantial impairment in education and other major life functions, what types of accommodations can be reasonably expected at the college or university level for prospective students with AD/HD? Below are some of the more common and useful accommodations:

- Extended time on tests (documentation must specify exactly how much time is required) with short breaks between multi-section or multi-hour examinations.
- Testing to be conducted in a distraction-free environment.
- Use of a computer with spell and grammar check for all written work and essay examinations.
- Access to a private room in a dormitory.
- Permission to use earphones with background music for work requiring intense concentration if this strategy has been useful in the past.
- Access to a coach/advisor to provide time management and work organization support and structure.
- Access to a writing center to assist with organization of papers and to assist with proofing final drafts of manuscripts.

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P.O. Box 746, DeWitt, N.Y. 13214

Fax: (315) 446-2012 E-Mail: addgsi@aol.com



■ Use of assistive technology, such as the Kurzweil Reader for those students who lose focus on required reading texts and Inspiration® software for those who have difficulty defining main topics and supporting details in the process of writing.

The student must take on the responsibility of having his or her needs met since parents can no longer fulfill this function. This may be a difficult task. Some students are ready for the challenge; others are not.

Accommodations are based on individual diagnostic information and therefore established by individual needs. There is no single “recipe” to meet the needs of every student with AD/HD. Consequently, it is extremely important that the prospective college student understand the impact of his or her AD/HD on current functioning, as well as which accommodations will have the greatest benefit. The student must take on the responsibility of having his or her needs met since parents can no longer fulfill this function. This may be a difficult task. Some students are ready for the challenge; others are not. This leads to our final area of concern: disclosure.

Disclosure

To disclose or to not disclose, that is the question. In the initial application process, colleges have different

approaches to the disclosure of a disability depending on whether they offer a special program. (This is more often the case with learning disabilities than with AD/HD.) A student can apply to a college without ever disclosing the presence of a disability if no services are requested. On the other hand, if the student seeks to use services offered to students with disabilities or to receive reasonable accommodations, then disclosure is required. Once the office of students with disabilities or the special student services office receives appropriate documentation, it is their responsibility to assist the student in receiving individual accommodations with different professors and classes. Responsibility is one thing; acting on that responsibility is quite another. Assistance can take various forms and be given with various degrees of intensity. It can come in the form of proactive advocacy or passive words. The receptivity on the part of instructors may often have little to do with either approach. Therefore, it is necessary for the prospective student with AD/HD to become an educated consumer of post-secondary student services.



idea to visit a number of schools to compare different programs and have a checklist of questions prepared for each interview. In addition, talking to other students about their experiences at a particular university as well as working with an educational consultant can be extremely helpful. In any case, ask the hard questions when visiting schools and when talking with admissions personnel. Most impor-

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Be an Educated Consumer

As previously mentioned, the degree of proactive support a student may expect to receive will vary from college to college. There is no universal approach! This is critical for the parent and prospective student to understand. A student should be proactive if he or she is anticipating some degree of support or any of a variety of reasonable accommodations. It is a good

tantly, prior to making a decision about enrollment, visit the special student services offices to determine exactly what kinds of services they provide. It should be easy to determine whether a specific school is an “AD/HD friendly” environment in which to spend the next four or five years and whether the supports and accommodations available will be sufficient to meet the student’s needs.

Time to Advocate

Once the student has chosen a college or university, it's time to make use of the supports available for that student. Remember that just as it was the student's responsibility to disclose his or her AD/HD and to provide documentation, it will also be the student's responsibility to access the necessary services. Sometimes the student will have to approach the instructor about tape recording a class. Other times the student may need to ask about having access to extended time on an examination or extended time on a major research paper. The responses may be positive or negative, but if the student's documentation specifically delineates these accommodations, then the student has the right to expect them. In some situations, the student may be able to get some guidance ahead of time regarding particular faculty members and any built-in biases they may have.

On a final note, personal advocacy is not always adversarial in nature. At times it requires the art of negotiating, practice in conflict resolution, and bear-

ing the consequences of one's actions. Self-awareness and self-knowledge come with the personal growth that students experience in a college or university setting. Everyone can benefit from the results—the student, the instructor and the university, but only if everyone remains receptive and open to the process. ■

Lynda J. Katz, Ph.D., has served as president of Landmark College since July 1994. Prior to coming to Landmark College, Dr. Katz held dual appointments at the University of Pittsburgh as associate professor of Psychiatry and Education in the School of Medicine and associate professor of Health and Rehabilitation Services.

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