

Support Eases the College Transition

The transition from high school to college is stressful for all young adults. For those with depression or anxiety, seeking support and accommodations is especially important.

Disability protections change at the college level. Students are no longer guaranteed accommodations or entry into any class or academic program they choose. It is their responsibility to disclose and document their disability and request accommodations, said Lyn Legere, MS, CRC, CPRP, the former director of the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation at Boston University.

“Students must get the ball rolling and advocate for themselves,” Legere said. “The college is not going to seek them out for testing and accommodations. There is a real danger these students will try to rough it out alone or just fall between the cracks.”

Students with psychiatric disabilities who take the initiative to seek assistance have better college retention rates, she said.

Don't disclose a psychiatric disability until AFTER acceptance to a university, Legere advises. Then, at least a month before classes begin, parents or the student should contact the student disability office to explain the disability and request accommodations. Parents and students should bring neuropsychological testing data and/or a letter from a psychiatrist or psychologist who has treated the student to specify helpful accommodations.

The disability office will provide a letter that students can take to their teachers explaining necessary accommodations. This letter will help with difficult disclosure issues. With this letter in hand, a student does not have to tell professors what the disability is, so their privacy is preserved. Not all professors will grant accommodations, even with such a letter, and there is often no university requirement.

It is also vital to plan for a crisis, Legere said. If a student must leave school temporarily because of a hospitalization, for example, a student disability liaison can contact teachers and help the student exit in a way that preserves his academic record and allows him to return to school later. Such a plan may also prevent a student from failing or dropping a course when they may be able to obtain an incomplete and finish the required work when their health improves.

Parents should discuss these strategies before a problem arises because many students don't seek help when they are not feeling well, Legere said.