

Making college work for you

by Patricia Wadsley

“There is a significant increase in requests for services from students with chronic diseases, like MS,” said Cathy Trueba, director of the McBurney Disability Resource Center, at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

That means that many schools, the University of Wisconsin included, have started

For more on how to get the services you may need for college, call 1-800-344-4867 and ask to speak with an MS Navigator.™

to emphasize support services with increased and specialized staff to meet students’ individual needs—emotional, mental and physical. If you are among the many young people with MS heading to college this fall, get a leg up now.

Support services make the difference

“The Center on Disabilities was great,” said Alyssa Mazur, a student with MS now in her senior year at Cal State Northridge.

“There were peer mentors to talk to, scribes and note-takers when I couldn’t keep up. School opened up a whole new world, because of support services.”

What should I look for?

Leigha Lucas, information and referral specialist for the Information Resource Center at the National MS Society, urges prospective college students to think through how MS affects their daily lives. “If vision is an issue, look for enhancements such as voice recognition software, text conversion, and note takers,” said Lucas. “If fatigue is the main symptom, you may need a reduced course load, or class breaks. With cognitive issues, think of requesting extended test times. If mobility is your biggest challenge, you are going to look at how easy it is to get to your classes, and get to your dorm.”

Students who don’t want to deal with a dorm right off could consider a community or commuter college.

“Our students often use us as a launching pad to get used to school, then go on to a four-year college” said Sonia Rivera, ADA coordinator at South Texas College. “They go back home at

night, but while they are here, a golf cart scoots them around from building to building.”

Start looking early

“In the same way you would start to research the academics of a certain school, research the disability services,” said Trueba. Support services for students with disabilities are called something different at each school so click on the school’s Web site and search under “disabilities.” Look at how many students with disabilities are enrolled and how many professionals work in the disabilities center. This can give you a good idea of whether you and the school are a good match.

Go to the support services office before you apply

Harvard University’s disability coordinator Marie Trotter encourages students to go to the university’s Disabilities Office long before they apply. “If you are thinking of applying, set up an appointment to visit when

The ADA and school services

The ADA requires all public and private universities to provide “reasonable accommodations” in order to give all students access to the same education. Since the passing of the ADA, “reasonable accommodations” have evolved greatly from basic access like ramps, and accessible classrooms, bathrooms, and dorms. Now, school support services include a number of resources from state-of-the-art adaptive technology like voice recognition software, screen readers and screen enlargers to professional and peer support services. –P.W.



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classes are in session, not just on the weekend or during a vacation. Observe classes. See how students are able to get around.”

Once you've been accepted

“Once you've been accepted by the school of your choice, contact the disabilities office,” said Lucas. “The school will ask for documentation of your diagnosis from your doctor and will need time to verify your eligibility for services, perform a consultation, review your needs and arrange to have

accommodations in place before the semester starts. Even if you don't anticipate that you'll need services, it's good to have arrangements in place if ever you do.”

Tell the professor—or not?

“The choice to disclose your diagnosis to professors is up to you,” said Lucas. “If you need services, professors will know you have a disability but won't know your diagnosis. Disclosing your diagnosis is a choice only you can make.”

“At Wisconsin, we have an accommodation plan we issue to students” said Trueba. “It's called a VISA (for Verified Individualized Services and Accommodation) plan, and it tells professors what accommodations our staff is recommending for an individual, but does not state the student's diagnosis. Most schools do something like this. It shows professors that the student has gone through a formal process.”

Dive right in

It might take a few weeks to get the kinks out. Everyone new has to adjust. If you find that you are not getting the services you are supposed to be getting, see your ombudsman, or the ADA coordinator, whose job it is to handle student grievances.

Alyssa Mazur's experience with Support Services at Cal State has been positive. “The most important thing is to advocate for yourself,” she said. “I see kids with disabilities who need services but are too shy or embarrassed to get them. We are the students. And it's the law. It means we can get the education we need.”

Patricia Wadsley is an associate editor of this magazine.

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