

Hard Decisions for Learning Disabled

By [JACQUES STEINBERG](#) November 3, 2011

The admissions process can be stressful for even the most gifted, organized students. But to applicants with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or learning disabilities, the path to college can feel like a maze. The Choice addresses some of the issues such students face.

1. Should a student who has struggled with A.D.H.D. or dyslexia disclose it when applying to college?

The answer, like so many aspects of college admissions, depends mightily on the particular student. (Testing companies keep confidential whether a student was given extra time on the SAT and ACT, so that's not an issue here.) Edward de Villafranca, an independent consultant and former admissions officer and high school counselor, puts it this way: "The decision to disclose or not isn't actually one of 'Will it hurt my chances?' but rather one of 'Is it helpful to know?'"

Disclosure early in the admissions process is often recommended for applicants who need to provide context — a legitimate reason grades might have dipped uncharacteristically from 9th to 10th grade, or why a standardized test score seems abysmally low when compared with an otherwise stellar academic record.

On the other hand, an applicant with strong grades and test scores may decide not to raise a red flag — maybe learning issues were not an academic impediment, or are no longer relevant.

"The primary risk is having the essay read by someone who doesn't understand learning disabilities, someone who thinks A.D.H.D. is a hyperactive kid in fifth grade bouncing off the walls," said Rachel Masson, director of admissions at Landmark College in Putney, Vt., which offers an associate's degree and is exclusively for students with conditions that impair learning. "Legally, of course, admissions officers are not supposed to hold it against a student," she added. "The reality is, we're all human and there is that human factor involved."

However, Ms. Masson suggests that once admitted but before putting down a deposit, all candidates with issues seek out the campus office that coordinates support services. (Applying for special services is typically separate from the admissions process.) Students will want to ensure that the institution has the proper experience and sensitivity as well as a community of students wrestling with similar challenges.

2. Once the decision is made to tell, the question remains: where and how?

Students have several places to explain their learning issues on the Common Application: the main essay, short-answer portion or the very last portion of the application, where supplemental information is sought.

That's where Rose Valliere, a 23-year-old who transferred this fall to Keene State College in New Hampshire from Landmark, chose to reveal her condition — A.D.H.D. and difficulty with reading comprehension. Ms. Valliere, who is studying to become a dietician, didn't offer much detail. She decided, "Don't make it the star of your application, even though it may feel that way for you."

I asked Marybeth Kravets, co-author of “The K&W Guide to Colleges for Students With Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder,” about Ms. Valliere’s approach. She didn’t disagree — some students “may not want to blow it up out of proportion.” But for many students, she said, the main essay, particularly where it asks about a critical experience and its impact, is a good place to introduce a learning disability.

She imagined how a student might construct an answer: “You might note that on my transcript, there was a struggle in mathematics. Understand that in third grade, I was diagnosed with dysgraphia. It took many years for me to understand how I learn. Now look at me. In senior year, I’m in A.P. Statistics.”

(For a college that does not accept the Common Application, a supplemental essay can be attached.)

3. How does one go about assembling a list of colleges known to provide supportive environments?

While finding an institution that’s a good fit is a concern for all applicants, it’s even more crucial to students who struggle to concentrate in a lecture setting or require extra time on tests or additional instruction.

Due diligence in collecting information is essential. “Research must be done and conversations must be had with learning support centers in any college or university that a student and family is considering,” Mr. de Villafranca said, adding the admonition that “not every place operates the same way.”

Among resources are the [Learning Disabilities Association of America](#) and Ms. Kravets’s “K&W Guide” (Random House/Princeton Review), an 800-plus-page encyclopedia that lists services at each college, admissions requirements and contact information for program administrators.

Families without access to good school-based counselors can consult the [Independent Education Consultants Association](#), whose Web site offers a searchable database (you want a counselor who has a track record of success with applicants with learning disabilities, and verifiable references from former clients; fees can be several thousand dollars).

Landmark graduates regularly go on to traditional four-year colleges, and Ms. Masson says the college has had especially good success placing them at American University, Lesley University, Lynn University and the University of Denver, whose Learning Effectiveness Program is widely considered to be strong. As is the University of Arizona’s SALT (Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques) Center. Note that Denver and Arizona, and some other programs, have a multistep application — one to the university, one to the program itself. This year for the first time, the online application to the University of Arizona asks students if they are applying to the SALT Center, and links to it.

As Mr. de Villafranca reminds, a learning disability “isn’t a black mark.”

“I think the Americans With Disabilities Act has really been instrumental in helping us talk more openly about various disabilities and differences,” he said. “We are much smarter about how we learn, and that has made this whole issue less of a clandestine, ‘Shh... say nothing’ kind of one.”

RESOURCE:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/06/education/edlife/hard-decisions-for-learning-disabled.html?pagewanted=print>