

How College Students with Learning Disabilities Can Advocate for Themselves

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Speak up! Fight your own battles! When kids used to taunt in the schoolyard your friends would gather around to stick up for you. Now, on the college campus, it's your chance to stick up for yourself – fight for the accommodations that you require to succeed as a college student with learning disabilities. Through grade school and high school, your parents and your special education teachers fought for you. With your interests at heart, they spoke up on your behalf, helping you get the services you needed to thrive.

Now it is time for you to learn how to advocate for yourself, to support yourself, to reach your full potential in college, where there are large classes, less interaction with professors, and the expectation that you will manage your own study time. You must speak up! Here are some suggestions for easing the transition from depending on others to being your own advocate.

Know Your Rights

It's natural to feel uncomfortable discussing your learning disability and to worry about how professors will react. Perhaps they don't believe that learning disabilities even exist, or maybe they have a child with learning disabilities and completely understand your situation. In either case you are not alone. If you are planning to attend a college with an enrollment of 25,000 students, then approximately 350 of those students have learning disabilities, writes Howard Eaton in his book *Self Advocacy*. Remember that you are not asking for a favor: you are asking for a right that is guaranteed by the federal government. As a person with learning disabilities, you are entitled to receive certain accommodations. In fact, the American with Disabilities Act says, no discrimination should take place against anybody who is disabled. This includes persons with learning disabilities. Colleges are required to allow you an equal opportunity for success. Your job is to work hard to take advantage of that opportunity.

Know Yourself

To advocate for yourself and to deal with the inevitable roadblocks you'll face, you should understand what kind of disability you have so that you can explain it to others. How do you process information? What strategies work for you? Remember that a learning disability is a perceptual difference that inhibits intelligence from manifesting itself.

Be able to explain to the instructor what special kind of perceptual difference you have which inhibits your learning. Speak in terms of your strengths and weaknesses.

The list of accommodations that other students with learning disabilities have received is not a shopping list from which you can choose. You are entitled only to the help that allows you to use your accommodating techniques in order to overcome your disability.

Develop Your Support System from the Beginning

As soon as possible, or before school begins, make yourself official, register with the college's Office for Students with Disabilities. Find out where the tutoring and editorial services are, introduce yourself, and create your supports. Make friends in class. Other students are excellent supports.

Remember the fundamentals. From the first day in class be dependable. Attend all classes: arrive on time, and complete work by its due date. When possible do extra credit work. There's no substitute for hard work. This conscientiousness helps you advocate for yourself, because professors want to help responsible students.

Decide in which subjects you are most likely to need help. Use your high school experience as a guide. It's unlikely that those trouble spots will evaporate when you get to college. It's also unlikely that you'll require accommodations in every class.

By meeting with professors before something goes wrong, they will not think you are using your learning disability as an excuse, and you will be in the position to get the help needed from the start.

Be Professional

When you are ready to meet with your course instructors, schedule an appointment. What you have to discuss is important. Don't catch the instructor in a rush before or after class.

Bring some documentation describing your learning disability to the appointment. Some people need things in black and white. Be friendly, greet your instructor and maintain eye contact. Before getting down to business show interest in your instructor. In life, if you want someone to be interested in you, show interest in him or her. The goal is to get your instructor to cooperate with you and to promote mutual respect in the process. School life is political and learning how to play the political game will be good practice for life.

Explain what kind of learning disability you have and what accommodations you require. Explain, for example, that you have an attention deficit disorder and therefore need a quiet room, if you are dysgraphic you may need to tape record classes to enable you to take better notes. When this connection is made between your disability and what you need, few professors will turn you down.

It must be clear that you are not asking for standards to be lowered. You are using tools to help you perform. To pass, you must perform the task that your classmates perform. You may, however, need to get there in a different way. Dyslexic students have to read the textbook just as non-dyslexic students do. They may just do it differently through the use of books on tape.

Don't be aggressive. It isn't in your best interest to turn a professor against you. But don't be passive either. Stand up for your rights. The best approach is to be assertive. If things don't go well, ask the Office for Students with Disabilities for help. No matter what happens in the meeting, thank your professor for his/her time. Stay professional.

Many students have no problem getting their professors to cooperate. Their success has a lot to do with how it's done. By developing these social skills, you're developing your emotional intelligence, which is in the end one of the most important accommodating techniques for overcoming a learning disability.

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