



Tips for Surviving Your Freshman Year of College

One of the first things I figured out after I graduated from high school and went to college was that college has a lot more responsibilities and work than high school. In high school, you may have had a whole posse (group of people to support you) behind you, physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, etc. In college, you are on your own to find the help you need, even if you do not know what that need is yet. The following is a tip sheet to assist you in your quest for higher education.

- **Start Early**

I started visiting colleges in my sophomore year of high school. Make sure to get an appointment with the disability services office to discuss what they have to offer you. Listen to what they say. You should get a good idea if they “fit” you and the college itself fits you. The disability services office (or the person in charge of disability accommodations/access) can make or break your choice in colleges. In my case, I narrowed my choices to four. The first college I visited was not wheelchair accessible. However, the meeting taught me how to handle the interviews, what I could expect in the way of assistance, and how to advocate for myself. My “first choice” college was very accommodating and the disability coordinator was welcoming. I quickly dropped another choice after the coordinator told me I should not go to a university but should attend the community college in my county. ‘Nuff said. The college I chose to attend accepted me with open arms and although it is one of the oldest colleges, they were willing to make changes for me. They do not seem to mind when I leave my “marks” on the narrow doorways of the 150-year-old buildings!

- **Create a Plan**

Once you decide on a college, schedule another meeting with the disability services office to discuss the plan for your accommodations. Meet with the Campus Life Office to talk about dorm life and whether or not you will have a roommate. In my case, I do not because of all my equipment. It is very important to meet with the Head of Safety to come

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up with a plan in case of fire or drills, tornado, or medical issues. In my experience, there was an alarm set off one morning and the plan failed. I was stuck in bed while everyone else left the building and the firefighters came in. Because we had a plan, and my mother stepped in another meeting was held with the fire department, safety department, disability services, and campus life to develop a better plan that is in use for all students with disabilities. Never underestimate the power of Mom (or any other advocate on your side).

- **Find the Support You Need**

If you have to hire a Personal Care Attendant (PCA), hiring a good PCA is essential to a successful year. I was fortunate; my disability coordinator suggested I place an advertisement on the school's website. I found out the hard way if you hire a student, you will definitely need a back up. I discovered that just because someone is older, does not mean they will not get distracted. More than once, I was stuck in bed and had to wait for hours for my back up to help me.

- **Tips for Managing Your PCA**

- It is important to set ground rules early in the process. You need to decide what you expect the PCA to do for you. Put the agreement in writing so everyone knows and understands what is expected. If possible, talk with this person about other things. This will also help them become familiar with your speech patterns. You will develop a close relationship with your PCA. It is important for your PCA to really get to know you as a person and not just a job. They will be less likely to blow off their responsibility if they have a personal interest in you.
- The relationship with your PCA can help support you in trying times. In my case, my PCA was also my note taker. She attended my classes with me and wrote notes, scribed papers and tests, and when needed, translated for me.

- **Have a Social Life**

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Almost as important as going to classes is going to social events. It is important for people to get to know you because one day you may need to ask them for assistance or support. As I participated in the social side of college, I began to feel an attachment to the school. When people started seeing me around campus, more and more people started to talk to me outside of classes. There is always something going on. I even participated in my first candle light vigil!

- **Get to Know College Staff**

It is very important to get to know the staff at the college. Not just the professors, but also the security officers, housekeepers, secretaries, and cafeteria workers. I am on a first name basis with many of the workers in the dining hall. I always get the best cuts of meats and usually more than I can eat.

- **Meet With Your Professors**

Meet with your professors by yourself so they can get to know you. Your note taker can sit with you or anywhere in the room. Make sure your professors get a copy of your 504 plan (or other college plan/paperwork describing your accommodations). There are many ways of participating in class; raising your hand, being an active listener, and laughing at the instructor's jokes are a few.

Attending college is the most liberating feeling I have had in my life. At times, it seems hard, like I'm just spinning my wheels. My professors say that is normal. College is life changing for everyone and during the first days, most freshmen are looking for the same things...friends. My number one piece of advice is to get involved. All colleges have mixers in the first few weeks so the freshmen can get to know each other. Stay determined, keep up with your studies, follow these tips and you will have a successful first year.

Resources

- Your High School guidance counselor
- The person in High School who helped you get the accommodations you needed and/or worked with you on your Individual Educational Plan (IEP)

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- Your State's Vocational Rehabilitation Office – Check out "KASA's What Is Vocational Rehabilitation" at: <http://fvkasa.org/resources/files/work-voc-rehab.php>
- Transition Resource: "There Are No IEP's in College", by Amy G. Dell, at: <http://www.tcnj.edu/~technj/2004/transition.htm>
- Disability Friendly Colleges Listings:
 - For students with Physical/Sensory Disabilities:
http://disabilityfriendlycolleges.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=49:ada-plus-college-services-&catid=54:researchingcolleges&Itemid=78
 - For students with Intellectual Disabilities:
<http://www.thinkcollege.net/databases/programs-database?view=programsdatabase>

This tip sheet was written by Bryan Dooley with review and edits by national KASA's Board and Task Force.

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