



# The College Search

- Judy Simon, CSW

Finding the right college for your child can be an overwhelming, stressful process; if he or she has a disability there are even more factors that you need to consider in your search. I can't profess to have all the answers, nor can I conclude that there is a right or wrong way to go about it, but I can relate the steps we went through looking for a college that would be a good match for our son who has Tourette Syndrome (TS), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Hopefully, our experiences will help others who will be going through the college search process.

Our earliest concerns were whether a child who was so dependent on parents, teachers, resource room and guidance counselors for his day-to-day survival would ever function well enough on his own to be able to go to college. We worried that, although our son was very intelligent, his lack of social skills, emotional control, and organizational skills would prevent him from ever matriculating in college at all. We didn't realize that his social, emotional and organizational development would continue throughout high school, and now, as a senior in high school, he looks nothing like the child he was at 10 or 11 or even 15 or 16 years of age. Students use the PSAT and SAT scores to help identify a college that will be a good match for them academically; typically, they don't take these tests until the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Although some of them may be thinking about college long before that, not until that age can they seriously zero in on those schools that would be appropriate for them. It is the same with social development; you may be considering a range of potential schools from community colleges and small colleges with intensive disability support systems to large state universities, but not until your child is in 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade can you gauge his/her social and emotional development well enough to be able to narrow down the selection to a smaller set of appropriate schools.

We started our search by accumulating information on colleges, keeping them on two separate lists: the first included schools that were a good academic and social fit and the second included those with disability support services. We added and eliminated schools from the first list based on information we found in the standard college guides, such as those by Edward Fiske, Loren Pope, The College Finder by Steven Antonoff, The Princeton Review, Peterson's guides, the Insider's Guide and the USNews and World Report rankings. All of these can be found in public

libraries and bookstores, and much information can also be found on the internet at sites such as [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) and [www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com). Also, colleges have detailed information on their own websites. The kinds of information we got from these sources included, size, location and cost of attending the school, average SAT scores and proportion of applicants admitted, proportion of students who return after freshman year and who graduate within 6 years, proportion of students in fraternities and sororities, extra-curricular activities, whether the school tends toward liberal or conservative, diversity, and how accepting the school is of students who are different. At this stage we had to think about whether or not our son would live at home and go to a local college, live in the dorms at a local college or go away to school, and if so, how far away. Would he be more comfortable at a small liberal arts college where he could get a lot of individualized attention or a large university where he wouldn't stand out as being the kid with the disability? Would he rather go to a college in a city, suburb or rural area? He had strong opinions on some of these variables, on others he didn't know what his preferences were, and on some he didn't care.

We obtained information on disability support from several sources also. It required considerable investigation. We started with The K. and W. Guide and Peterson's Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorders. Both are available at libraries and bookstores. These guides provide a general overview of finding a college for a child with a disability and suggest specific accommodations. They also identify many schools with disability support and classify the level of support from partial to comprehensive. The school with the most comprehensive services we found was Landmark College in Vermont. It is a fully accredited college designed specifically for students with learning disabilities and ADD. Although colleges and universities are legally not allowed to discriminate against persons with disabilities, in practice the level of support ranges from zero to comprehensive. Our goal was to find the intersection of the two lists of schools- those that were a good social and academic fit and those with disability support. A key aspect of the search was determining how committed these schools are to supporting a student with TS.

Most colleges expect students to seek college information on their own and contact the schools themselves. This is an unrealistic expectation for

many students with TS (as well as many without). Whenever we found that a school was insistent on limiting the parent's role in the college search, we felt this college did not understand neurobiological disorders and would not be a good match for our son. While some of the schools didn't respond to our request for information on disability services at all, some of them, including Brown University, New York University and University of Rochester responded eagerly.

How do you determine the level of support a college is willing to give to students with disabilities? We did not have the time, nor did our son have the patience, to visit many schools to find out in person. While other families were doing the spring, summer and fall trips stopping at five or six colleges per trip, we were doing our search in the library, on the internet and on the telephone. Once we had limited the choices to 5 or 6 schools, we could visit the top two choices. Then, if he wasn't accepted at either of those, we could visit the rest.

We were able to find a tremendous amount of information on the USNews site and on each college's own website. On the USNews website, if you click on "education," then on "colleges," look at the rankings and click on any individual college, then click on "disability" you can find much specific information. For example, following this procedure for Washington University in St. Louis, you find that Wash U provides note-taking services, oral testing, readers, tutors, talking books, reading machines, tape recorders, videotaped classes, untimed tests, learning center, and extended time for tests. You can find the colleges' own websites in some of the college guides mentioned above or by doing an internet search. Often we had to read between the lines and interpret what was and was not included on the website. If the disability support office and services were easy to find, that was a good first step. When there was no disability information on the college's website, it gave us the impression that the college was not interested in attracting students with disabilities. We didn't eliminate the college from our list because the omission could have been an oversight, but we were more likely to follow up on a school that was proud to be in compliance. Even better were those colleges which listed the specific supports they offer. You can figure out from the accommodations whether they are more geared toward students with physical than neurobiological disabilities. Though none of them mentioned TS, a good

barometer of a school's willingness to provide accommodations for a student with TS is whether or not it lists accommodations for students with ADD. Any questions you have can be followed up by an e-mail or phone call to the college.

Often included on the school's website is the procedure for requesting accommodations, and some even have a request form that you can download and print. Typically, the student doesn't apply for services until after s/he is accepted to the college. Some schools consider it the student's responsibility to notify professors that s/he has a disability while other schools will notify the professors for the student. However, no school will notify professors without the student's written permission. We thought it was a good idea to limit our search to colleges that make the commitment to notify professors and follow up in the case of non-compliance. One of the colleges we identified (Brown University) will notify professors, intervene in the case of non-compliance and offers self-advocacy classes and mentors for students with disabilities. Colleges such as Brown- and there are many others- that systematically provide preventive services and teach self-advocacy are providing support and a safety net while helping the student become more independent.

Medium to large universities generally have an office designated for coordination of services for students with disabilities with a coordinator or director and several staff members. I would be wary of a university with more than 3,000 students that doesn't have such an office. We found that some universities, such as Carnegie Mellon University include the student disability services within the Office of Equal Opportunity Employment for staff and faculty. The services are nearly entirely devoted to staff with physical disabilities. This was clearly not appropriate for our son. Another thing to watch for is how many staff members work in the disability support office, and if the number has increased or decreased over the past few years. If the office has only one or two part time workers and the director leaves, there may be no coordinated support services when your child enrolls. Johns Hopkins University has a student disability office, but when I called I found out that the director had retired; her position wasn't filled and she was going to be continuing on a part-time basis until they found a replacement. She assured me that her staff could run the office without her. As of my last phone call, there was still no replacement. Though JHU may well provide accommodations, I wasn't sure who would go to

bat for our son if, for example, one of his

professors refuses to let him take tests in a distraction-free location.

Small liberal arts colleges do not usually have a separate office for students with disabilities. Instead, there is a dean or assistant dean who is assigned the job of disability support coordination. Sometimes you can tell by the website if the school welcomes students with disabilities or not. If there is ample information on accommodations, you can assume that the school's position officially is favorable. If there is little or no information, either it is an oversight or the school really is not interested in attracting students with disabilities. Again, any questions can be cleared up by a call or e-mail.

Some of the Long Island and New York schools we found to have comprehensive services for students with neurobiological disabilities are Adelphi University, Hofstra University and New York University. Other schools we identified as having partial services and seem to be committed to assuring that the student receives appropriate services are University of Rochester, Rochester Institute of Technology, Vassar College and Colgate University. This is by no means a complete list, nor is it a guarantee that the services

your child needs will be provided by these schools. It is merely a place to start your search. For all of you who are or will be taking this exciting journey, I wish you a fruitful search. We found it heartening that so many schools are committed to delivering a first class education to students with a disability. Our search had a happy ending; our son was accepted to his first choice school, Brown University.

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