

# Learning Disabilities and Psychological Disorders in College

As if adapting to a new academic setting is not challenging enough, students heading off to college with learning disabilities or psychological disorders must negotiate a whole different set of hurdles. **BY MARIA T. ARANDA, PH.D.**

**STUDENTS WHO ENTER THE** university setting with these difficulties have demonstrated that they possess the intelligence and academic skills needed to succeed. Many times, however, they need certain academic accommodations in order to show their knowledge and skills effectively.

Academic accommodations are class or testing modifications provided for a student with a disability. They allow students to show – without interference by the disability – that they grasp class material. Accommodations simply help level the playing field. They can include extra time on tests, the use of a note taker in class, a separate room for testing, or the use of technology to help with reading or writing. For example, a student with a reading disability (which tends to affect the speed of reading rather than reading comprehension) may



require extra time to read tests in order for them to show they've mastered the class material.

Many students enter college today with a history of receiving academic accommodations. These were likely provided in high school and during standardized tests like the SAT. Many of these students, however, quickly discover that

the psychological evaluation that helped them receive these accommodations doesn't meet their universities' requirements. While the written reports provide evidence that there is a disability, the simple presence of a disorder is often not enough to qualify for college accommodations.

In order to qualify for academic accommodations, universities require updated psychological evaluations, usually within the last six months or one year. The report must also document the current academic and cognitive limitations that make accommodations necessary.

One reason universities require updated evaluations is that the nature and severity of learning and psychological difficulties change throughout a person's life. These new evaluations, however, need to be comprehensive. They must assess many different areas of functioning. They must also provide current, relevant diagnoses. Psychological reports produced in public schools don't usually contain diagnoses. Nor do they include much of the information required by universities. As a result, many colleges reject them as proper documentation of disabilities. The same reasoning is used for documents such as an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), which are used by public schools for students in special education. Students need to familiarize themselves with universities' required documentation, moreover, because they do differ from school to school.

Given the hurdles to acquiring accommodations in college, students with histories of psychological or learning disabilities should use the time in their final year of high school to obtain the necessary psychological evaluations. Although some evaluations may be covered by medical insurance (testing for ADHD for example), many evaluations are not covered, posing an additional financial obstacle. Since these can be pricey, it pays to plan ahead.

While college is filled with new challenges, with careful planning and preparation, gaining accommodations for learning or psychological disabilities doesn't have to be one of them. Planning ahead can make a student's adjustment to college life just a little bit easier.



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