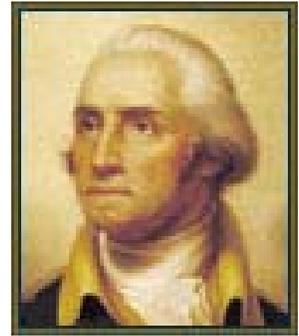


GW HEATH Resource Center

TOP TEN THINGS TO THINK ABOUT AS YOU PREPARE FOR YOUR TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

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Summer provides a perfect opportunity for students with disabilities to evaluate progress made over the past school year toward their academic goals and to explore new strategies for continued success. Many such students have recently left the structure and security of secondary education and are venturing out into postsecondary education and employment and the increasingly independent realm of adulthood. For young adults with disabilities, this transition is the culmination of a lot of hard work, many obstacles overcome, a roller coaster full of emotional ups and downs, and countless IEP meetings. To be best prepared for the journey ahead, students should be closely involved with their own transition planning and also recognize that considerable planning and preparation remains to be done.

We offer the following Top Ten list to help transitioning students focus on areas that they can control to ensure success and to get them started on the journey with solid footing.

1. Know Your Disability.

If you are a transitioning student with a disability you will have to become your own resident expert on everything about

your disability, the ways it impacts your activities, and the ways you have learned to overcome it. This expertise can be the key to your future success, for if you can identify your strengths and challenges you will also likely be able to identify your needs and limitations. Knowing the areas in your life that are limited due to disability puts you in the driver's seat for your future.

To practice sharing your expertise about your disability, consider preparing an Elevator Speech. This is simply a concise, plainspoken, and direct explanation of the exact nature of your disability (it's called an elevator speech because, while informative, it should also be relatively brief, no longer than it might take you to reach your destination in an elevator).

2. What are Your Needs?

Every transitioning student needs to be able to answer this question before commencing postsecondary education. Integral to identifying needs is understanding which of your life functioning skills require accommodation. Do you have an auditory processing deficit that requires you to use books on tape? Does

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accommodating your disability require that you sit in the front of the classroom where you won't be as distracted by others and where you can concentrate more fully on the professor? Having the answers to these sorts of questions will help you to define the arrangements you need to make before the semester begins. Reviewing your transition plan and your IEP with teachers and parents can help you anticipate the specific accommodations that will need to be arranged.

3. Postsecondary Choices—Weigh Your Options.

There are so many options out there for the transitioning youth and it can be very easy to make the wrong choice. The key here is to remember that you, the student, have to live with the choices—not your parents, teachers, or advisors. Thus, you need to be an active participant in any planning or discussion about your postsecondary options and you need to consider all of the options before making a choice.

With members of your transition team, evaluate what will be the best direction to take after high school. College is a great option: it can provide important opportunities for independent growth, and provide a wealth of encounters with new people and ideas that can enrich the rest of your life. But for many the sudden freedom that college affords can be too much for students who have to manage their disabilities as well. Don't overlook the community college option. It may be perfect if you aren't sure you know what you want to study, if you want to get the hang of arranging for accommodations before heading off to a bachelor degree program, or if you'd like an opportunity to learn better daily

living skills before living away from home. You can always transfer to a four-year college when you feel more prepared. And the school of record that appears on your diploma is the one where you finish.

Other options for postsecondary study include vocational and technical schools, which are great places to learn a trade and embark on a career. Employment is also an appropriate postsecondary path. Some students with disabilities make this choice because they are already working as a result of a placement while still in high school. For the student who likes to work and is thriving and enjoying such independence, this may be a good situation at this time. Frequently, the desire to excel in a job or profession dictates that additional schooling obtained later on.

The point is, it's your life and these choices directly affect you. Therefore, it's wise to consider ALL of your options, carefully weighing the pros and cons of each.

4. College Entrance Exams.

Many postsecondary programs require standardized testing for consideration of admissions. The most common of these are the SAT and the ACT. It's important to get an early start on planning for the SAT's and ACT's. Requests for accommodations may take some time to be processed as they are reviewed on a case-by-case basis. Also, pay particular attention to the documentation requirements of any testing for which you are seeking accommodations: you're request will not be considered if your documentation is deemed incomplete. You should also seriously consider taking the PSAT in spring of your junior

year in high school—it’s good practice for the SATs or ACTs to come and allows you plenty of time to re-take the test in your senior year if needed.

It is also preferable if you can demonstrate precedence for testing accommodations. In other words, you have needed accommodations all through high school and therefore there is still a need for accommodations during these scholastic aptitude exams. Taking ownership of the process of arranging for accommodations on these exams is a great way to hone the self-advocacy skills that you will need in your postsecondary endeavors. The following websites will get you started on arranging for testing and accommodations:

www.ets.org/disability
www.collegeboard.com/disable/students/html/indx
www.act.org/aap/disab/index.html

5. Documentation.

The documentation of your disability needs to be current and complete and you need to know exactly what documentation your next school or training program will require if you are seeking accommodations or services on the basis of disability. The two most important questions you can ask of any of the postsecondary programs you are considering are “What documentation is needed for me to receive accommodations?” and “How old can it be?” Most schools will ask that the documentation not be over three years old.

If new documentation is requested, you may need to find a provider that can perform the necessary evaluations. If

you are eligible for or already receive state vocational rehabilitation (VR) services, inquire with your local VR office about testing and evaluation. In some cases, if your documentation is not too old, the evaluator can make an amendment to the current documentation and provide an updated statement about the disability and what accommodations are recommended. Stay involved in this process—the better you understand your documentation, the better able you are to identify your needs and to ask for the help that will give you a chance to do your best.

6. Self-Advocacy.

This is the whole game right here, and we’ve alluded to it in each of the previous points. It is never too early to become your own advocate and it is never too late to learn. As early as possible, begin asking questions at your IEP and Transition Planning meetings—such active engagement will pay off in all aspects of your later life when you have to self-advocate for services, identify your disability, and articulate your needs to function successfully.

If you haven’t been as actively involved in your transition planning, fear not. There are a lot of things you can do right now to become more involved and that will invariably make you a more resourceful, articulate self-advocate. Begin by gathering the information required to take the SAT or ACT exams or other entrance exams with accommodations. Or, research the requirements for documentation in order to receive services at various postsecondary programs. And familiarize yourself with your civil rights and the laws that protect them, in

particular Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990). Visit various websites and consult your reference librarian for other sources of information.

7. Vocational Rehabilitation Services.

A good practice drill in self-advocacy is going to the local Vocational Rehabilitation Services office to determine what services may be available to you. Vocational Rehabilitation may be able to help you to attend a particular trade school, and in some instances, has been known to pay for two- and four-year college coursework. To locate the Vocational Rehabilitation office nearest you, go to the link below.

<http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/SBSES/VOC/REHAB.HTM>

8. Living Space Issues.

As your transition plan comes together you may have to make some decisions regarding your living space. Your living arrangements can be enormously important to your chances for postsecondary success. Do you welcome the opportunity to live in a small space with other roommates? Are you confident that you have, or can quickly develop, the social and independent living skills needed to survive with one or more roommates? Consult with your parents and teachers for input and advice. Living space issues are frequently ignored prior to admission, only to surface after the student encounters difficulty. If you and your family and advisors agree that you might require special housing, such as a single room, discuss your concerns with the

disability service coordinator at the school or program. Specific accommodations may be required to get the arrangements you need but it should be addressed well in advance of the semester, and perhaps even prior to admission, as there may be limitations on the availability of housing options within a particular program.

9. Time Management.

Are you a good manager of your time? Not many people leaving high school are, regardless of disability. But many postsecondary experiences, be they technical school or college level learning or employment, will challenge your ability to manage time. If you haven't mastered these important time management skills yet, start practicing them now. Are you in the habit of using a calendar to keep track of your appointments, classes, and social obligations? Are you good at estimating how much time a particular task might require? Will you need to schedule time with a tutor? Are all of your classes nearby or does it take longer to get to some than to others? So much of adult life requires an ability to plan for and juggle multiple tasks. Any improvement you make in managing your time will serve you well throughout your adult life.

10. Mistakes are NOT the end of the World.

Students who approach this next phase of their lives with reasonable expectations are often the best prepared to face many new challenges. Know that there will be days when note takers do not show up; when wheelchair ramps are not cleared; when proctors are not

available; when professors do not understand; when plans and strategies do not work out. But that is OK and to be expected. Reacting coolly and acknowledging that many such hiccups happen to everyone—not only you—is an important part of learning to adapt and to compensate. Overcoming such inevitable pitfalls will only make you stronger and better prepare you to deal with the next bump in the road.

Review these ten topics occasionally to ensure that you are anticipating the necessary steps to a successful transition. Be sure to seek guidance from family and counselors whenever questions arise: doing so helps you to hone your self-advocacy skills and to become increasingly confident that you can achieve your goals for postsecondary education.

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