



Stepping Up: Becoming One's Own Advocate in College

A Student's Perspective

At Morrissey-Compton, we often assess students at multiple stages of academic development. Parents may bring their daughter in for her first evaluation in third grade and learn that she has dyslexia. As she transitions to middle school and then to college, she may return for updated testing to track her progress and determine current needs. Here, a young man with a learning difference kindly and candidly shares some of the successes and challenges surrounding his transition from a high school student with parent and teacher support to an independent student on a college campus.

Heading off to college is full of dramatic changes. You live in a dorm full of people (and noise). Your family isn't around. You eat in a dining hall and can decide whether frozen yogurt is a perfectly acceptable breakfast. In the midst of all these differences, one of the biggest changes I encountered in transitioning to college was having to be my own advocate when it comes to my learning difference.

From A Secure Support System...

For me, high school was a safe place. I had the same counselor year after year. I sometimes took classes from the same teachers in different years. Even if I was in a new classroom, I had a litany of former teachers on campus who could serve as advocates or advisors and take an active role in helping me find success. In fact, for me, as is often the case, it was a teacher who suggested getting tested for a learning difference. Because dealing with my learning disability came with lots of tests, paperwork, meetings, and bureaucracy, my parents took an active role in making sure that everything went smoothly.

...to Sudden Autonomy

When I went to college, I discovered an entirely different situation. While you may still feel like a kid, universities will treat you like an adult. No one is "responsible" for your success. No one is going to hold your hand. I encountered a whole series of changes that made it so I had to step up. I had to be my own advocate if I was going to make sure my academic life avoided any major obstacles.



This wasn't easy. In college, you have new teachers every quarter or semester. Because of the high number of course offerings, you will likely not have friends in most classes like in high school. Classes, especially introductory lectures, can consist of hundreds of students. You don't have the old teachers, counselors, or parents you did in high school to help you. The thought of walking up to a

professor I didn't know after class to have a discussion about accommodations for my learning difference was terrifying to me. In fact, for the first few weeks of school, I delayed taking any action because of my fears and reluctance to step up.

Taking a Chance

As the quarter went on, it became clear to me that while it was indeed difficult to be responsible for myself, I needed my LD accommodations if I was going to be successful in college. That meant stepping up and being my own self-advocate.

I tentatively reached out to my professors, told them about my learning difference, and asked them to meet to talk about my accommodations. All of my professors were helpful, and clearly had come across this situation before; I, of course, was not even close to being the first student with a learning difference they had encountered.

After a year in college, the process of communicating with my professors about my learning difference and accommodations has become second nature. My experience has given me a few lessons that I would like to share with incoming students:

- **Your professors want you to succeed.** They are not as scary as they may seem in front of a classroom of hundreds.
- **If your class has teaching assistants, contact them.** They are usually only a few years older than you, so are far more approachable. They often handle the logistics of the class and are more likely than a professor to interact with you directly.
- **Reach out to professors and T.A.'s early in the term to meet at a time that's convenient for them.** This will give them ample time to come up with a plan of action. If you leave them with little time before you need your accommodations, they will be less helpful.
- **Find your academic resource center early in the year.** The employees there will go out of their way to help you and can serve as useful advisors.