



OPEN LETTER TO PARENTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES ABOUT TO ENTER COLLEGE

Dear Parents,

I have been working in the area of students with disabilities at the college level for more than 30 years, but that is not why I am writing to you today. I am writing as a parent, and thus as someone who shares all your current anxieties. [...] I *wanted* to be involved (in her high school education), but I also *needed* to be involved since, by law, the school could not do anything for, to, or with my daughter regarding her disability without my permission. [...] As I prepare to pack her up and take her off to college in the Fall, I recognize that this role has ended for me – and the word "anxious" doesn't even begin to describe my feelings.

[...] As parents, it is time for us to step back and allow/encourage/gently nudge our SWD's (Students With Disabilities) to assume significant independent responsibility for their own lives, both academically and personally.

As you and your SWD prepare to visit campus for that initial meeting with a disability service provider [DSP] at the college, you would do well to think about what can be accomplished at this initial meeting, what needs to be said – and who is going to say it!!! [...] Much as I hate it, I know that (my daughter) has to be the one to convey all this crucial information (not me!), for a number of reasons.

First, colleges and universities provide services and support to SWD under very different laws than those that governed services in the K-12 system. As a parent, I have no rights under Section 504/ADA in speaking for my SWD who is in college. [...] My favorite website for learning more are at: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/list/ocr/transition.html>. The services and support available to SWD are sometimes very different than what was provided in high school, and the college is under no obligation to continue the services given in high school or to adhere to the recommendations of an outside diagnostician. The college will make its own determination of what services and support to offer, based on the documentation of disability and their interview with your SWD. There are no IEP's in college, there is no place to sign off with my parental approval. Indeed, the college doesn't legally have to care whether I am satisfied or not. My daughter is responsible for her own destiny now.

More importantly, [...] it is your SWD's *first* chance to convey that information all by himself/herself. [...] You want [the DSP's] first impression to be one that is positive and reassuring. The [DSP] is anxious to find out whether your SWD is mature enough to handle the responsibilities and independence of college life. Here are some specific suggestions for helping your SWD to shine in this newly focused spotlight:

- DON'T be insulted if you are not invited to sit in on the initial meeting between your SWD and the disability service folks. [...] You will get a chance to ask your questions, but recognize that it may come later, rather than sooner.
- If you are invited to sit in on the meetings [...], DO acknowledge your SWD as the authority on their disability-related needs [...].

- [...] Try to talk as little as possible in the meeting. This is not your meeting. Remember, you are there as an observer, not as a participant.
- DO take some time prepping your son/daughter in advance on the issues that you think need to be discussed[...]. Rehearse with your son/daughter, if they will let you.
- DON'T interrupt. If you disagree with something the [DSP] says, or if your SWD says something that you know is incorrect, or if you see your SWD agreeing with/to something when you know they have no idea what they are agreeing to- DON'T INTERRUPT! Let the interview play out. Give [...] your SWD an opportunity to clarify matters, or simply wait to see if the confusion/disagreement remains. It is important to know just how independent and accurate students are in describing their needs.
- DO prompt your son/daughter to speak up and share those important points as the interview progresses. [...] Give an open-ended question that encourages your SWD to flesh out the response. [...]

Why not take notes as the interview progresses? When your son/daughter has exhausted the list of topics to discuss, and the [DSP] has shared all the information they thought was important, it is YOUR turn to talk. [...] The most important thing to remember now is that you do not want to undermine your son/daughter's credibility.[...] You might say, "I was surprised to hear Jane say _____. I would have said _____, because" You'll get your point across without directly contradicting what your son/daughter said. Your goal is to assure both the SWD and the [DSP] that you are supportive of their budding understanding, and simply want to share another viewpoint.

An old adage maintains:

There are only two things a parent can give to a child ...

One is roots. The other is wings.

It is time for our kids to solo. That is a scary thought for us, as parents, and it is sure to be scary for them, too. That's OK. This is what we have all been working towards for a long time. Remember, your son' daughter will call, email or text if they need you. They know what you can do for them, but now it is time for them to go it alone. Take a deep breath, cross your fingers, wish them well- and walk away. All will be well!

Best of luck,

Jane Jarrow