



PROFESSIONAL MONOGRAPH SERIES

THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL OF BERGEN COUNTY ■ MONOGRAPH NUMBER FIVE ■ APRIL 1996

College and the Learning Disabled

by Toby Braunstein, Director of Education, Community High School

This article will look at three components that we consider when we are guiding our students in the college admission process: 1. The criteria for success; 2. Post high school options and 3. Student preparation.

The Criteria for Success

Making the transition to college is difficult for any adolescent, even for the most successful high school student. However, when counseling a student with learning disabilities, the issues are multiplied. Without a plan, the college placement process can be a disheartening experience.

For that reason, at Community High School, counseling is an integral part of the process in preparing our students for a post secondary setting. This planning requires a cooper-

ative effort by the student, parents, teachers, specialists, and Child Study Team. In fact, planning for our college-bound students actually begins when they enter our high school program. Although many learning disabled students have the potential for success in a college setting, a traditional four year college program is not always the appropriate choice for all. There are many other post high school options one may consider.

For that reason it is important that each parent examine the basic criteria for success and that parents note that we are always mindful of these criteria when developing a student's educational program. What are the basic criteria?

(a) *Motivation, persistence and stamina* are important factors to consider in any post-high school placement. Motivation is surely the

leading criteria. All post-high school options require hard work - the learning disabled student has to work harder. He has to be persistent, for it generally takes him more time to complete his assignments, course requirements, and sometimes even to complete our high school program. While stamina is often overlooked, many colleges are now finding it to be an important strength.

(b) *Average or above average intelligence* is important to being successful in college. Programs for LD students frequently require the WAIS-R, an individualized intelligence test. Colleges are looking for at least an average range in the Full Scale score, but they will look at the sub-scores as well. Examination of the patterns of the sub-scores are helpful in planning for our students. For instance, liberal arts programs may be more likely to accept students who have average or above average verbal abilities. Through our years of counseling and testing of our students, there have been cases where intelligence and testing was surely inaccurate, or where it underestimated a student's potential. In fact, this brings to mind many students who have proven to be more resourceful than their scores indicated. Nevertheless, in general, the WAIS-R is a good indicator of the level of academic and social abilities and is a good predictor of achievement.

(c) *Student's understanding of academic strengths and weakness.* Success is not only dependent upon meaningful evaluation of the LD student by specialists, but also on self-understanding and self-assessment. Lack of self-understanding can lead to denial of learning differences or difficulties, unrealistic expectations, dependency, and feelings of helplessness. Self-understanding can have long-term benefits, such as self-advocacy, independence, ability to utilize support services, and a positive outlook. Thorough understanding can mean capitalizing

on your strengths.

(d) *Good study habits and the ability to compensate.* Our high school curriculum not only addresses content, reading, writing, and study skills, but also includes the important area of learning strategies. Research today strongly suggests that training in learning strategies will better equip the LD student to deal with school learning. The research also finds that many LD college students have ineffective study habits, such as lack of organizational and time management skills. Some of the keys to survival in a post-secondary setting are learning to work independently, knowing how to compensate for deficits, utilizing supports and accommodations, and putting in the necessary time.

(e) *Positive social and independent living skills.* Our counseling program provides information on an ongoing basis that gives us insight into a student's social/emotional profile. We look at acceptance of the learning disability, plus their social, problem-solving, communication and coping skills. There is little doubt that social/emotional factors greatly contribute to the success or failure of the LD student in college. Many times a student can pass academic courses, yet flunk dorm life. Going away to college will naturally require greater independence in daily living skills, and our student has to be prepared to deal alone with the daily demands and personal responsibilities called for in a college setting. Separating from family and school relationships in a known environment can be overwhelming for many of our students. They often need more time to develop independence.

(f) *A pre-college curriculum.* We believe that a student must have a comprehensive secondary curriculum to meet the demands of college courses. LD students need more preparation than the conventional student. They need more content and more high level course work. Current studies are showing that successful LD

college students have had more high school English and Literature courses. Therefore, a challenging program rich in content as well as comprehension and language development should be scheduled throughout the high school years. And remember, for our students time can be their greatest ally. For some, an additional or post high school year may be what they need.

Many of our college bound students are not strong in all the above-mentioned criteria. In fact, this list should not be viewed as rigid or formal. There isn't a list or a test that can guarantee success or even failure. But if a student is committed to post-secondary education, there is a program for every LD student. Counseling and planning are critical, they require an ongoing collaborative staff effort. Of course, parent and student insight and awareness are invaluable to this effort. Parents of LD students have always had to be involved and creative. The college transition process requires continued parent input and creativity. Fortunately, the transition process here at Community High School has been rewarding, as we have had the opportunity to see so many of our graduates succeed in post-secondary programs.

Post High School Options

Possible post-high school options fall into three categories: degree programs, transition programs and certificate programs.

Degree Programs

Increasing, two - and four - year colleges are providing support programs for learning disabled students. New programs are surfacing in large and small colleges, and in less competitive schools as well as highly competitive colleges and universities. It is important to note, however, that not all schools offer the same level of

support in their programs.

The amount of support varies from school to school. As a guideline to discussing the services available to our students, we divide these programs into three levels of support: minimal, moderate and comprehensive. Serious study and investigation of these services are necessary to find a successful union of students' needs and college offerings.

A great many colleges now offer minimal support; however, they do not provide "specialized" services for their learning disabled students. Any services they extend to LD students are available to all. Those services may include tutoring and remediation courses in reading, writing and math. Students who can do well in the academic mainstream, and can self-advocate for their specific needs in this environment are able to succeed.

Colleges that offer moderate support, the next level of services, do not necessarily have staff members who have extensive training and experience in working with learning disabled college students. They typically have a wide range of services available to help their learning disabled students, such as tutoring, remedial courses, note-takers and counseling. However, students are expected to take responsibility for obtaining these services. Students who do well in these programs are usually not only well-motivated, but have the ability to self-advocate and follow-up. We have often found these services to be very good and to provide all of the assistance an integrated student may need to succeed.

The greatest level of support, the comprehensive programs, have staff members trained in learning disabilities and they furnish a range of support services designed for learning disabled students. The comprehensive support program provides diagnostic testing of the learning disabled student's cognitive ability, academic skills,

language ability, learning style, and study skills. These programs ask to review the students' social profiles also. Some of the programs provide intensive support and advisement. Learning disabled students need advisors to plan their academic programs. Services may include a director or case manager to coordinate services, LD specialists, tutoring, counseling, compensatory accommodations, testing accommodations, peer support, a modified curriculum and advocacy training. Generally, students who go to special high school programs or attend classes for the learning disabled will need a comprehensive program. Many learning disabled students succeed with the help of these comprehensive support programs. Since services and accommodations vary, we must carefully choose a college that provides the level of support a student needs to fully realize his or her potential.

Finally, when choosing a college, it's also important to know not only the necessary level of support, but to remember that there are certain considerations that are of interest to all students. Among these, we consider the type of college, the admissions criteria, location of the college, student body, pre-college course requirements, all aspects of campus life and finally, the cost!

Transition Programs

Some learning disabled students who have completed four years of high school have the potential to do college level work but still have needs in the refinement of academic skills and in the area of performance. We suggest several routes. Here at Community High School we offer a transitional post-high school year. Our students attend Bergen Community College for several courses and continue to work at Community High School in areas of remediation, learning strategies and academic skills. For some, the social experience of attending college

while still maintaining support in a familiar environment, makes this a most beneficial year. Another choice for these students might be one of the several residential schools that have programs for the learning disabled and also include a post-high school program. Additionally, some mainstream college-preparatory programs have support services for learning disabled students and make available a post-high school year. This kind of program can benefit a student by offering an opportunity to live away from home in a supportive high school environment, with small classes and more time to work on improving reading, writing and math skills.

Some junior colleges offer skill-building and course preparation for students who can then transfer to a four-year liberal arts program. Several of these junior colleges have support programs for learning disabled students.

A nearby community college offers the advantage of living at home while beginning the college experience. A student can still have the support of his family, and at the same time create a network of additional academic support. Local community colleges vary in the services offered to learning disabled students.

Again, there isn't a correct route for all. We try to carefully match each student to the Transitional Plan.

Certificate Programs

Many LD students are motivated to continue their education but would have great difficulty succeeding in a degree program. However, these students have the potential for job training and independent living. They seek the experience of living away from home in a supportive and trusting environment. There are a few campus-based, two - or three - year programs for these students.

These programs have curricula that are designed to meet the specific needs of the LD population they serve. The programs are highly individualized and differ in their vocational training and approach to independent living. Many of our graduates have found these programs to be helpful, enjoyable and challenging. Students receive a certificate upon completion. Some of the graduates from such programs are now holding jobs in sales, early childhood and human services, while a few have even continued to take credit courses in college programs.

As you can see, there are many different programs out there. The choice and the match are crucial. Success builds success. Our students have been accepted to all types of programs: schools with minimal support - Rutgers, Carnegie Mellon; moderate support - Bradford, University of Hartford, New England College; comprehensive - Curry, Fairleigh Dickinson University, St. Thomas Aquinas and Marist. Some go to two-year associate degree colleges, such as Dean, Harcum Jr., and Mitchell or Bachelor of Arts programs such as Ithaca, University of New England, Boston University, Adelphi and Hofstra. Others live home and go the community college route - Middlesex, Bergen or Rockland Community Colleges. And some continue their post-high school year at Community High School, while others go to similar programs away from home such as Landmark or Pine Ridge. Our certificate students have succeeded at the Threshold program at Lesley, the VIP program at New York Institute of Technology, and the Para Education Program at New York University. The list of schools that have accepted Community High School graduates goes on and on as you can see. *The important thing to know is that there is a place for every one of our graduates.* Our goal is to choose the correct option and to prepare our stu-

dents, both academically and socially, for success in the schools of their choice.

Student Preparation

At Community High School, the assessment and program planning for each student is frequently reviewed with the future in mind. A discussion of several student profiles illustrates just how our program addresses their individual needs and future goals when we consider college placements for our learning disabled students.

In writing this section, it was difficult to limit the student profiles to just a few. Each year we have a senior class of 25-30 students, and about 90 percent of each graduating class continues on in different types of post-high school placements. Considering the fact that school is never easy for a learning disabled student, this success rate is extraordinarily high. For our discussion, we decided to choose three students, each of whom went on to a different type of program.

Let's begin with Mark who entered Community School at age 10. He was very tense, frustrated, and had a defeatist attitude. Test records showed severe delays in all areas of learning and language skills, and he was described as shy and withdrawn. Happily, by the end of his first semester in our Lower School, his teacher felt that Mark was responsive and responsible, and eager to learn. He continued to progress well and went on to become a motivated student, developing outstanding social skills. In fact, in high school he became a leader, which was very important to him.

When I first met Mark in our High School, he was an attractive, together young man - probably our most popular freshman student. He was also a good all-round athlete, play-

ing on our sports teams as well as working after school in a sports complex. Wherever he was - school or work - everyone liked him.

Academically, Mark's strengths included perseverance, dedication to learning and an ability to self-advocate. Yet his test scores continued to show severe deficits in basic skill development and in language acquisition. In addition, his full score on WISC-R, an intelligence test, was in the low average range. However, we knew test scores never presented an adequate picture of his ability.

Although Mark was eager to go to college, he didn't have the required academic skills for success, and the programs that did have strong support services for LD students wanted higher IQ scores. In consultation with Mark and his parents, it was decided that he should start school at the community college level. The school we chose did have a remedial program, but although Mark worked diligently for one year, there was no dramatic improvement in his academic ability. Nevertheless, he wanted to go on for a degree.

We decided on the associate's degree program at Delhi College. Delhi has moderate support services and a career training program. From the start, Mark was able to maintain good grades. Although we were ecstatic, we couldn't quite understand his ability to get those high grades. When he came back to visit, I asked him how he had done it. He told me that he did as much work as he could independently, then he would visit his teacher at school or at home, for whatever time it required to complete a paper or review for a test. That was Mark, always willing to go the extra mile.

When Mark completed his program at Delhi, his mother related that the school was recommending his continuation in a bachelor's program. However, Mark and his family decided

against that plan, and instead, he made a successful transition to the world of work. He is presently working for a prominent express delivery company. In fact, Mark told me that the person who interviewed him for the prospective job was a Delhi graduate as well. Naturally, Mark impressed them with his good social skills and his ability to be resourceful. Not only did Mark get the job, but he has proved his staying power by being there five years. Mark is an example of how social strengths, coupled with relentless perseverance and stamina, can lead to success.

Now let's consider Jared. Jared was diagnosed as learning disabled at the age of three and was placed into a special education program in the first grade, with a history of learning delays and severe speech and language deficits. He entered our lower school at age ten. Records showed that Jared had a full scale IQ within the average range, and was functioning below third grade in all the academic areas. Behavioral comments said that he was lacking in self-control, that he did not work well alone, that he did not get along with others in his class, and that he did not accept suggestions or responsibility for his own actions. Jared needed a coordinated plan for both academic and social development.

By the time Jared entered our High School program, he was an active, engaging young man who was enthusiastic and worked diligently on all tasks. While still suffering from poor language processing and poor concentration abilities, his academic skills were beginning to develop. He was also growing in the social areas, reaching out for approval from both peers and adults.

Within our intensive language development program, Jared's vocabulary and comprehension scores improved significantly. His ability to compensate through the application of learning strategies led to dramatic improvement

by his senior year. He worked hard, and he wanted to go to college. Still, he would need a highly supportive program to meet his needs. His strengths and interests remained in the areas of sports and in extracurricular programs at the High School. Photography was an elective subject in which he showed consistent talent and creativity.

Given the frustrations he undoubtedly faced in learning, Jared's motivation and psychological integrity were impressive and an important personal strength. His family was always loving and supportive, never making him feel he couldn't achieve things he wanted to achieve.

To begin his post-high school journey, we recommended a college program that was geared to helping students with special learning needs. At Curry College, Jared was permitted to tape record lectures and to use taped texts in order to reinforce his learning. He also was able to have many of his exams given verbally and without time limits.

Meanwhile, his interest in photography continued to grow and flourish. By completing his liberal arts core subjects at a school with strong support, he was then able to go on to Syracuse University, where he was awarded a bachelor's degree in photojournalism. He is now working for a leading photographer in the New York area. Jared exemplifies the student who knew how to utilize support and capitalize on his strengths.

Dee is the third of our profiles. She is a very pretty girl who is tall, blond and has a sunny smile. She expresses herself quite easily and enjoys talking to people. I remember meeting Dee and her mother when she was in eighth grade and hoping for admission to our program. I listened to her tell how difficult her life had been. Her smile vanished as she described school as a daily experience of trying to keep up

and "never getting there." Undiagnosed until that spring, Dee consistently had near-failing grades, without any understanding of her poor performance. As a result, she almost always felt humiliated and depressed. Her mother was very concerned and had sought therapy for her daughter several months before. Fortunately, she began therapy with a highly skilled psychologist who suggested educational and psychological testing. Testing results indicated that Dee was significantly delayed, even though her IQ score was in the high average range. Both Dee and her mother were relieved to know that Dee was dyslexic, stating, "At least now we have some understanding of why things never went well in school."

Dee's psychologist recommended the program at Community High School. As a freshman, Dee worked very hard in her classes. Slowly, her skills improved and she developed greater confidence in her ability. Academically, she could begin to take risks and challenge herself. Socially, however, she continued to need ongoing reassurance. Dee made full use of our counseling program as she still felt fragile and could easily be brought to tears. Counseling at school and in private sessions provided the safety net which Dee needed, and she responded well within our supportive environment.

As Dee approached her senior year, I went to lunch with her mother to discuss post-high school placement. "Dee has come so far," said Dee's mother. "She's a good student now." But still she knew that her daughter continued to need a great deal of support, and she was worried that a mistake or wrong choice would be devastating for Dee. I definitely understood her concerns. It was important for Dee to choose a school that not only had the necessary academic supports, but one that could also provide counseling to reduce her anxiety and stress.

Dee applied and was accepted to several fine programs and chose Bradford College. She was impressed with its small size, learning center, support staff and many of the students she met there. From the moment she visited the campus she felt comfortable, and that she belonged. "It's the perfect place after Community." Bradford is a college with small classes and lots of opportunity for interaction with professors and other students. Several Community High School graduates had done well at Bradford, and Dee needed that type of program in which to flourish. Dee received her degree last year and is now in graduate school. We learned from Dee that some students will need a small, caring environment -

even on the college level - to enable their continued academic success. Our graduates have been successful in a wide range of placements. No two students are exactly alike, and no two programs are exactly alike.

There is no doubt that college offers many potential benefits for learning disabled students which can have a lifelong effect. We can see that from the profiles highlighted here. However, as previously described, matching the student to the best placement requires careful evaluation of all the options available, as well as the review of the advantages each offers to make it possible for our students to succeed.

The Professional Monograph Series
The Community School of Bergen County
Lower School
11 West Forest Avenue, Teaneck, NJ 07666
(201) 837-8070
High School
1135 Teaneck Road, Teaneck, NJ 07666
(201) 862-1796