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How to judge college learning disability programs

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(MoneyWatch) If your teenager has learning disabilities, searching for the right college can become even more daunting.

Along with the usual attributes young people typically look for in schools, students with special needs look for institutions that provide extra services aimed at putting them on a path to graduate. Yet some families stress about whether they should even divulge that their child has learning issues such as dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

For guidance on how such families should proceed, I turned to Joy App, a college consultant in Houston. App is a certified educator in special and gifted education who has worked with many students with learning challenges.

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Although schools must provide support services and accommodations to student with learning disabilities, App says that what institutions actually offer varies dramatically. Consequently, it's essential that families contact the disabilities services office at every school on a teen's list.

Questions to ask a disability office

Whether you visit a college in person or speak to a school representative on the phone, families should ask these questions, App says:

1. How current must a student's testing be to to apply for accommodations?
2. How many students use your services?
3. What assistive technology (AT) services do you offer? Do you have an AT expert on staff?
4. What accommodations do you offer? What are the procedures and time-lines to receive them?
5. How many disability support counselors do you have on staff? Do they act as liaisons?
6. If a professor is not in compliance regarding the student's needed accommodations, how is the situation resolved?
7. What is the procedure to arrange extra time to complete exams? How much notice is required? Do students arrange added time with professors or through the disabilities services office?

8. Where do students take exams? Who proctors the tests?
9. What are most difficult majors/classes at the school for students with learning disabilities?
10. Will students have both an advisor in the disabilities services office and a regular academic advisor? If both, how will the two advisors work together?
11. What is the four-year graduation rate for students with the same learning disabilities?
12. Does the school track graduates who have used the disability services? If so, what do those findings show about their success after graduation?

As I mentioned earlier, some parents worry about informing schools about their child's learning disability. This need not be a concern. By law, any conversations a family has with a school's disability officer cannot be shared with the admission office.

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