

Landing the Helicopter: Orientation Processes for Students with Disabilities

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Current models of orientation are missing a key component and, in doing so, are hindering the ability of an underrepresented and at-risk population to effectively transition to a university setting.

Students with disabilities face a daunting transition to a university setting. Not only are they experiencing the normal growing pains associated with coming to college, with increased autonomy and responsibility, but they are also now having to articulate the impact their disability has on their educational experience. This is tough enough...but many of these students have never had to individually reflect on their disability, let alone advocate for themselves without their parents' or guardians' support.

In order to understand this gap, it's important to first review the process by which students transition out of a public secondary school. Public school students with disabilities typically have either an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 plan to help guide their educational experiences. These plans involve input from each student's parents, school administrators, teachers, and are typically initiated independently between the school and the parent. Through this process, parents and school officials together evaluate progress towards academic goals and discuss the resources necessary to meet and/or exceed any collaboratively developed milestones. Both parties (meaning parents and students) receive a copy of the signed plan. This intimate relationship occurring directly between parents and school administrators continues without any formalized student input until the student turns 18, at which point students become legally responsible for negotiating their plans on their own behalf. Parents can be involved only with the student's permission, but all legal rights and responsibilities fall on the student at that point.

At age 16 the school works with the students and the parents to begin transition planning. Depending on the student's developmental trajectory, students go through a very intentional process by which they identify whether they will move further in their education, seek employment, or continue developing independent life skills. Parents and students who intend to continue forward with their education receive general information on the university accommodations process. Administrators, parents, and students also work together to create a transition plan - including tips on topics related to self-advocacy, time management, and other skillsets associated with college readiness.

This intentional transition process out of high school is not always matched by an intentional transition process into higher education settings. Specifically, students receive no support on how to transition into having full responsibility for their disability accommodations. Information regarding disability services is included within broader presentations about university resources.

Additionally, these students must now learn about the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the limitations of what their parents can now do on their behalf. The second lesson that they often learn is that their academic success now rests solely on their shoulders, and it's imperative that they take ownership of their experience from start to finish.

This system makes sense for non-disabled students, because transitions to college are about self-regulation, discipline, and the ability to ask for help. However, there are some distinct procedural challenges associated with transitioning students with disabilities to a college setting. As previously mentioned, students are now responsible for 1) understanding their disability fully 2) advocating on their own behalf and 3) managing the administrative tasks associated with the implementation of accommodations into their daily academic life. We expect them to do this without any dedicated process to teach them how to go about doing this.

As previously mentioned, parents are expected to be heavily involved in the IEP process during primary and secondary education. Each IEP meeting is a negotiation of sorts, with the parents advocating for resources and the school doing their best to figure out what is financially feasible. The IEP process works best when it's an equal partnership between parents and school district administrators, and often there's too much at stake for parents to not be involved in the process.

Parents also have their own significant transition. They go from being actively involved in managing their child's disability-related accommodations to being active bystanders focused on teaching students how to advocate on their own behalf. This is not a bad thing – and this transition process of facilitating skills associated with self-advocacy is not unique to parents of children with disabilities. However, the stakes are a bit higher given the amount of administrative paperwork associated with transitioning from the resources provided at the secondary school level to the academic accommodations structure of higher education.

I share all of this from the unique perspective of having worked in both new student orientation and disability services...and being the father of a 6-year-old child with cerebral palsy and autism. I'm well familiar with the content parents often receive through the orientation process regarding FERPA and straddling the line between supporting and enabling, because I was responsible for the parent presentation within my specific unit.

My son is only 6 years old, but IEP meetings are a focal point for us at the beginning of every single school year. We come prepared for action - armed with documents from therapists, assessment outcomes, and a healthy understanding of special education law. We're charged with translating his abilities and disabilities into language that his teachers and administrators can understand...and failure to do so might result in my son not receiving the services he needs. We'll be doing this for the next 12 years of his life. We're in the driver's seat...and access to resources depends solely on how well we're able to articulate his case. The expectation is for us to be "helicopter parents," and anything less than full-on hovering is considered borderline negligent and can often result in significant gaps in my son's educational experience.

In that sense, my son's disability is part of who I am. It's central to every single decision I make on a daily basis, and it's always in the back of my mind. To that end, I can't help but wonder what happens when he transitions to a university setting. He will have a brief period of time where he's a contributing member of his IEP development committee with the support and help of his parents. If and when he ends up attending a university setting, those conversations will be presented to him as only involving him and an accommodations specialist.

I will no longer have a part in a process that I've been expected to drive for 18 years. Parents of children with disabilities are lauded for hovering up until graduation, at which point hovering becomes both legally and procedurally problematic.

It's challenging for the student to now move from an IEP/504 plan to a set of accommodations, and for the first time to have to articulate the educational impact of their disability. It's challenging for the disability service provider to facilitate that transition, especially when they themselves receive no formalized training on how secondary settings treat the disability. And it's challenging for the parents who are so conditioned to be in charge of this lengthy and arduous legal process...to simply sit back and have faith that it will work the way that it should.

This is not to say that we should allow parents of students with disabilities to be as involved with their college-bound students as they were in high school, but rather a call for a systemic review of how we orient students with disabilities and their parents to the new systems and structures they are expected to navigate on day 1 of their college experience. College and university orientation programs need to pick up the baton handed to them by the transition process of secondary institutions and help guide parents and students alike in their transition from IEPs and 504s to academic accommodations.

Interweaving disability services into orientation programs instead of simply presenting it as a resource would be a wonderful way to start. Providing parents and students with a toolkit for effective transition of disability documentation and responsibilities would be tremendously helpful. The common theme here is to acknowledge the need to address the transition of disability-specific responsibilities from parent to the student and do so in a way that prepares both parties for the system in which they're going to be operating.

The transition from high school to college is infinitely more complex, both emotionally and procedurally, for students with disabilities and their parents. Orientation programs would be well served to account for the growing pains associated with the transition of disability-specific responsibilities, and plan accordingly.