

An 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. My daughter, who graduated from high school in early June, will be going away to college this Fall. She has Cerebral Palsy, uses a wheelchair, and has limited speech capabilities, so you can be assured that I have been very involved in the educational programming and planning she has received during her years in the public school system. I *wanted* to be involved, 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. I sat through countless IEP meetings over the years, I was insistent on certain issues of academic support when I needed to be, and I agonized over everything from teacher selection to her successful social integration with classmates. And now, 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 feelings.

If you are worried that your child with a disability will have a difficult time making a to be worried. Very few *children* with disabilities can succeed at the college level. On the other hand, *students* with disabilities survive and thrive on college campuses

and who is going to say it!!!

As I approach that same milestone with my daughter, I find myself a little panicky, realizing that there are things about her disability and how it impacts on her functioning that I know and that the disability services provider needs to know, and that I may not have many chances to say. There is no doubt that I can explain those things more fully

Much as I hate it, I know that **SHE** 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. (If you

provider you meet with will have gathered some information that helps explain the differences between settings, both legally and practically. Two of my favorite websites for learning more are at:

<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html> and <http://www.heath.gwu.edu/>).

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

responsible for her own destiny now.

More importantly, while this may be your last chance to convey all that important *first* chance to convey that information all

you and your SWD are learning more about the campus, the resources, and the people who will be there to help when needed, the disability service provider is learning more about your son/daughter, as well. You want their first impression to be one that is positive and reassuring. The service provider 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:

x ' 2 1 ¶ Be insulted if you are not invited to sit in on the initial meeting between

- x **DO** take some time prepping your son/daughter in advance on the issues that you think need to be discussed the things that you would say if you had the chance. Make a list of the topics you would bring up, explain why you think each is important, and make sure your SWD has the list in hand when s/he goes into the interview. Rehearse with your son/daughter, if they will let you. If they are for making them sit and listen while you demonstrate how you would approach teachers arranged for extra time for you on tests when you were in high school. glish because it takes me a long time to put my thoughts in writing, but I never needed may be surprised to hear those words come out of his/her mouth at the interview!
- x ' 2 1 ¶ Interrupt. If you disagree with something the disability service provider 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 ' 2 1 ¶ **INTERRUPT!** Let the interview play out. Give the disability service provider a chance to draw your SWD out further, 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. You will get your chance.
- x **DO** prompt your son/daughter to speak up and share those important points as the interview progresses. Instead of explaining to the disability service provider

An old adage maintains:

One is roots. The other is wings.