

## When School Requires an Extra Push

### New services help students with disabilities

The first semester of her freshman year at the University of Arizona was an unexpected nightmare for Jodi Katz. While she had always found that reading was a struggle at her high school in West Islip, N.Y., getting through all her homework was becoming an impossible battle. She would read passages over and over without understanding a word. With her grade point average hovering at 1.9., Katz was desperate.

Then her adviser suggested she pay a visit to the university's Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques Center for students with learning disabilities. After a battery of tests, Katz was diagnosed with reading retention and writing problems, and she enrolled in the program. It worked wonders. She graduated last December with a 4.0 average in her major, business administration, and quickly landed a job as a software tester for IBM in San Jose, Calif. Says Katz, now 23: "I don't think I would have graduated if I hadn't joined SALT."

Katz isn't unique. More and more schools are offering special services for students with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). There are now 300 of these programs, double the number a decade ago. An additional 1,000-odd schools provide more limited services for students who have learning disabilities, such as a separate place to take classroom tests. But while legislation going back to 1973 mandates that colleges provide reasonable accommodations, "the definition of reasonable is different at different schools," says Maybeth Kravets, who is co-author of *The K&W Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorders* (Princeton Review Publishing, \$25).

**"VAGUE IDEA."** Indeed, some schools scrape by with minimal services, while others have extensive, separate facilities with tutors, special computer labs, and the like. These more elaborate--and often more expensive--programs differ, too, in what they offer. One may have graduate-school level tutors; another, designated intermediaries to work with students, faculty, and parents. And schools offering services that go above and beyond what the law mandates can--and do--charge extra for them. The University of Arizona, for example, charges \$1,800 a semester for its program. The tab at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla., is \$4,000 for the first semester and \$3,000 for each semester after that. Some campuses offer scholarships, but they're not easy to come by (table, page 154E14).

Not everyone with a learning disability requires a separate program. But knowing what a student needs calls for an in-depth understanding of his or her diagnosis--something many students and parents don't have. "Lots of kids come to college with only a vague idea of what their disability is," says Lisa Ijiri, director of the Program for Advancement in Learning at Curry College in Milton, Mass. One helpful item is the documentation that colleges require for students to qualify for learning disability services. This comprises psychological, achievement, and intelligence tests conducted by a psychologist in the past



three years, which should describe in detail the student's problem, along with appropriate remedies and accommodations. Students who don't discover a disability until they're already in college will have to undergo similar tests to get a formal diagnosis.

**EVERY WORD.** This documentation can help because tailor-made learning strategies are the backbone of most LD programs. At Curry, which features the oldest program in the country, the faculty and staff of 34 includes 16 educational specialists who meet with students one-on-one and in groups three times a week to discuss ways to compensate for their disabilities. In addition to ADHD, for example, Curry junior Kerry Logan, 22, has trouble processing visual information, making it hard for her to read intelligently. To overcome her difficulties, she says she learned ways to read a paragraph for the main points without highlighting every word on the page. Students can also meet with undergraduate tutors to get help with specific course work.

Other campuses have their own extras. Landmark College, a two-year school in Putney, Vt., that awards associate of arts degrees, is the only accredited college that is aimed solely at students with learning disabilities. The University of Arizona has a hundred tutors, nine specialists who teach learning techniques, plus a writing specialist who trains faculty members in how to help LD students. Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, meanwhile, does its own testing of incoming freshmen to better pinpoint subtleties that regular assessments might not pick up. And the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh uses a special approach to phonetics aimed at dyslexics.

LD students sometimes sign on for less than a full course load and, as a result, take longer to graduate. But they are expected to complete the same courses as others, with some exceptions. Adelphi University in Garden City, N.Y., for one, requires LD freshmen to take a special course on writing and composition skills. Lynn University goes a step further: Freshmen must take a three-credit course that covers everything from theories of intelligence to an analysis of each student's strengths and weaknesses. And since LD students often have trouble with foreign languages, programs usually let them substitute other choices. Many schools also require incoming freshmen to take four- or five-week programs in the summer, at extra cost, on such topics as learning strategies and phonetic systems. But by junior year, many LD students no longer need to rely on a program's services and often drop them.

If a student qualifies for one of the programs, LD experts advise visiting the campus office of learning disabilities before applying, or at least calling up and grilling the school's LD coordinator. That's the time to find out what kind of training tutors receive, or whether the program accepts students with just ADHD. It's also a good idea to call students at the college. The LD office will provide leads.

Ultimately, however, no matter how good a program, students have to be prepared to take responsibility for themselves. Most schools will help students contact professors at the beginning of each semester about special accommodations, such as extra time on tests.

But it's up to students to visit the LD office when they arrive and discuss the help that they will need. "You can't expect the college to call you up and say, 'We have your test scores, please come see us,'" says Imy Wax, co-author of *The K&W Guide*. It's also up to students to put in the time that's required to succeed. Jodi Katz recalls laboring late into the night to finish a paper her roommate tossed off in just a few hours. While special learning disability programs can mean the difference between graduating or failing, students must be prepared to work extra hard to win that sheepskin.

By ANNE FIELD

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