

My Transition from High School to College

Written By: Kelly Matula

Moving on to college is a staggering and sometimes frightening thought for any high school student. For students with physical disabilities, however, this move poses many more challenges. Mobility, strength, endurance, safety, self-sufficiency, social interaction, adjusting to a new setting, and many other aspects of this new life can seem very daunting to disabled students and their families. All of these different things worried me as I began to think about preparing for college. However, rather than just sit and worry, I took action—with help from parents, teachers, therapists, and others—so that I would be as well-prepared as possible by the time I started college.

Since disabled students may need special considerations in various activities, and often take longer to do things than non-disabled people, they may have to start planning and preparing in advance. For me, the transition to college was no exception. One of the first steps I took to prepare for college happened during the summer before my junior year of high school, when I attended a camp for college-bound visually impaired students sponsored by the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. During this month-long camp, the other campers and I lived on a college campus and got to experience firsthand what it's like to live in a dorm, wake ourselves up and get ready in the morning, navigate a college campus, go to classes, and do our own laundry, as well as many other things. This camp was a real eye-opener for me. Without going there, I never would have known how long I took to do activities of daily living like getting myself ready in the morning or doing laundry, how tired these things made me, and how much this fatigue interfered with the work that I had to do. Thankfully, I was able to discover this before I actually went away to college and had to deal with actual school courses. I left camp armed with a new knowledge of what I needed to work on in order to succeed in college, and my parents and I began to search for services such as occupational therapy that could help me master activities of daily living and learn to conserve energy.

The search for occupational therapy was long and complicated, but even while we were looking, I still did other things to prepare for college. After meeting with my counselors from the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired and discussing how visually fatiguing all my reading for college would be, I began to investigate reader services and assistive technology to help with this. I purchased a PlexTalk, a CD player and recorder that plays books on CD from *Recordings For the Blind & Dyslexic* (RFB&D), ordered some of my high school text books and literature books on CD, and began to practice using the PlexTalk. Even though I could handle my high school reading well using large print and magnifiers, many people told me that it was important to practice with the new technology before I went to college and would really need it. So I practiced with the PlexTalk and have become quite skilled at using it. I am sure that I will be able to use it when the time comes in college. I now believe that it is important to practice any skills you are going to need in college ahead of time so you will know how to use them when the time comes. I underwent an assistive technology evaluation and researched other technologies that would be useful to me in college. I purchased various assistive technology devices to help with classwork and mobility issues. These included screen magnification and text-to-speech software (JAWS), a portable Closed Circuit TV that interfaced with my laptop (MLS-Student),

as well as telescopic lenses and a hand-held monocular spotting scope to see buildings and navigate campus.

Remembering how tiring walking around the college campus was, I increased my aerobic workout schedule, which included use of an exercise bike and the video game Dance Dance Revolution, in order to increase my physical fitness. I took more walks over the summer to get my body used to walking a good deal, and, once I decided to attend Princeton, I went to the campus and walked around to get an idea of the distances I would have to cover. In addition, I obtained an electric scooter to negotiate long distances on campus, and practiced riding about so I could get my bearings. These measures helped offset the fatigue of having to walk long distances.

Also, I started receiving weekly occupational therapy to help with activities of daily living. With the help and guidance of my therapist, I am learning skills such as meal preparation, hairstyling and other personal grooming issues, and laundry, as well as energy conservation strategies so that I can do these tasks efficiently. The therapist has also given me some weightlifting exercises to strengthen my arms and hands, and recommended some special adaptations or technologies I could use to make living in a dorm and performing daily chores safer and more effective for me. I have learned a lot from OT so far, and am confident that the skills I learned will help me greatly in college and after.

Princeton University was most helpful in providing accommodations to make my transition to college life easy and successful. They provided large-print maps of campus identifying all wheelchair (and scooter) accessible ramps. They provided me with a dorm room ideally suited to my needs.

An important thing I did to prepare for college was to take a women's self-defense class. Self-defense is not something that a lot of people think of when preparing for college, but it is very important, especially for women. Being in a strange environment with many more people increases the likelihood of danger, especially because most college campuses aren't closed to the public or can't be as well secured as a high school could be. Particularly for disabled people, who are often chosen as victims because they are seen to be weaker and to be easier targets, a self-defense course is essential before moving off to college. Fortunately for me and for many other disabled people, self-defense does not require a great deal of strength or coordination. A lot of what I have learned is just common sense advice about how to avoid situations that would put me in danger, or how to not make myself an easy target. Also, the techniques I have learned do not require a lot of strength because they are meant to allow you to overcome someone much bigger and stronger than you. Self-defense is about knowing the right techniques and practicing them so they become automatic. It is about quick, easy ways to disarm someone so that you can get away, rather than about strength and fighting. Some towns may even have special self-defense courses for disabled people. Even if they do not, however, I encourage all disabled young women going off to college to find a self defense course. Even if you cannot physically perform all the techniques, you will be able to do some, and you will also learn valuable lessons about how to be aware of your surroundings and keep yourself from getting into a situation in which you would need to defend yourself.

These are some of the important things I did to prepare myself to go to college. I did not perform some remarkable feat, preparing for college *in spite of* my disability. I approached college the

same way I have approached every new activity in my life; I went to college *with* my disability, acknowledging it and finding ways to work around it and compensate for it. Using the techniques and skills I learned, I am on my way to realizing my full potential and succeeding in college. This was the most important and rewarding thing I could do, and the same thing that any able-bodied person going off to college hopes to do.

-Kelly