



A College Freshman with Learning Differences

In summer 2013, Brian L., who has learning differences, [was interviewed](#) about his recent graduation from high school and eagerly anticipated college experience. Here, he and his mom describe the last 12 months of his educational journey.

Q: What was your first semester of college like?

Brian: I loved the social aspect. The atmosphere was very friendly, and I joined some clubs, continuing with interests I'd developed in high school. One of the groups focused on anime (a distinctive Japanese style of animation), another studied Medieval and Renaissance traditions. I especially liked learning about different sword styles.

But I had issues with time management. The school offered accommodations for students with learning differences, but I had to schedule time with the tutor and other advisors assigned to me. When I was in high school, my mom or teachers handled that, so I wasn't used to that sort of responsibility. I wasn't ready for the workload and had trouble with the pressure of test situations. I felt overwhelmed and didn't do well.

I guess I'd say it was a combination of my not getting the help I needed and not helping myself. I transferred to a local community college for the spring semester.

Brian's Mom: Like any young person, Brian loved the freedom of college, making new friends and being able to stay on his computer till 3 a.m. But when we visited him, we realized he was struggling. By late October, he still had trouble finding his way on campus and he was confused about the dining hall hours. I began texting him every morning so that he'd wake up in time to have breakfast and get to his first class.

He has difficulty with executive functioning, so he often didn't take advantage of what was available. The school provided a tutor, note takers, access to professors' PowerPoints and extended time for testing. There was even a special ed grad student who was willing to help him structure his day, but he rarely contacted her. He became frustrated and eventually stopped attending classes.

Brian's professors were supportive and rooting for him to succeed. It would have helped, though, if he'd had more help managing the transition from high school to college, perhaps a special orientation or pre-semester meeting with tutors.

Despite the difficulties Brian experienced, his teachers wanted him to register for a second semester, but we felt that he needed the extra support available at home, so we all decided he'd be better served by attending the local community college for a while

Q. How has community college worked out? How are you spending your summer?

Brian: I only took two courses during my spring semester at our community college. It was more manageable, and I felt less pressured and more in control.

This summer, I'm taking a single course in remedial math, and the teacher is really helpful. There's no question he won't answer.

I'm also attending sessions with a local organization called Spectra Services. We're learning how to use social media to communicate appropriately with different groups—family members, friends, acquaintances, strangers. I'm also attending sessions on career planning.

Brian's Mom: Brian did a little better, grade-wise, during his spring semester at the community college. He attended all his classes but wasn't taking notes or doing all the homework. This summer, though, he's been having a different experience. He's taking a single, intensive course, and that focus seems to work better for him.

He took the initiative to get the necessary paperwork from the school's disability services office and to meet with his advisor about both summer and fall classes. And he got a 92% on his first test! He seems to have found his comfort zone.

It's obviously going to take him more than four years to earn a degree, but we're encouraging him to speak with a transition advisor about eventually attending another four-year college.

Q: What advice would you offer others with learning differences about getting the most from college?

Brian's Mom: I wish we'd begun researching colleges earlier during Brian's high school years, that we'd sat in on classes and more thoroughly vetted schools to be sure they matched his needs. We have now found some colleges with more supportive programs. One that seemed interesting has a service that provides a graduate student who will unobtrusively shadow the student with special needs in order to provide real-time guidance. However, the large fee—in addition to the private university tuition—makes this cost prohibitive.

Brian: Be sure you're ready for the responsibility. And it's okay if you're not! Some people can't handle the large leap from high school to college right away, and community college can be a good transition. Not everyone's cut out for college, so consider trade school.

I'll be taking three classes in the fall and, for me, that will be a good step forward.

About this Article: *We hope you find this article informative, but it is not legal advice. You should consult your own attorney, who can review your specific situation and account for variations in state law and local practices. Laws and regulations are constantly changing, so the longer it has been since an article was written, the greater the likelihood that the article might be out of date. SNA members focus on this complex, evolving area of law. To locate a member in your state, visit [Find an Attorney](#).*

Requirements for Reproducing this Article: *The above article may be reprinted only if it appears unmodified, including both the author description above the title and the "About this Article" paragraph immediately following the article, accompanied by the following statement: "Reprinted with permission of the Special Needs Alliance – www.specialneedsalliance.org." The article may not be reproduced online. Instead, references to it should link to it on the SNA website.*