# College Survival Skills

DO·IT

## Tips for Students with Disabilities to Increase College Success

Congratulations! You have decided to go to college – excellent decision. A college education can increase your opportunities for success. However, you will find the college learning environment different from that of high school. College is less structured and will require you to use more self-monitoring skills than you needed in high school. There will be no teachers or parents making decisions for you. Be prepared to face an increased level of academic competition and to have less contact with your professors. You will be the person responsible for your actions, your learning, your successes and your failures as a college student.

Are you a student who has a disability? If this is the case you will be dealing with a new and more complex process of external support than ever before. As reported by McGuire (1991), "Often college-bound students with learning disabilities fail to understand that they will face a different set of demands within a postsecondary setting. They soon become overwhelmed by the amount of assigned material as well as the fast pace of instruction. Many lack the skills and strategies that are necessary for managing and self-monitoring their learning in a variety of contexts." It is vital that you arm yourself with a well thought-out plan and strategies for success long before that first day of class.

As a student with a disability, it is critical that you understand your disability and how it affects your ability to learn and participate in the college experience. Understanding your rights and, equally important, your responsibilities as a college student with a disability are also critical to your success. The office of disability support services at the college you plan to attend can help you reach these goals. This office can play a key role in your success and will refer you to other areas on campus where support services are available.

Many students believe that if they are interested in college and motivated to learn, they will be successful – this is not enough! "No one would expect to be able to succeed as a neurosurgeon or a pro football quarterback without training, but countless thousands of students assume they can succeed in college even if they are not skilled in reading, writing, listening, and other basic study activities." (Carman, Adams, 1984)

Research shows that most students have not developed a systematic approach to study skills. In college, your instructors will take for granted that you have these skills, that you can read, write, listen, take notes and work on exams and assignments effectively. Unsuccessful students bumble through these activities. Successful students have a system. Plan to be a successful student – start college with survival skills!

No two people learn in exactly the same manner. We all have unique ways of processing information. It is vital that you understand your own learning style and find your keys to success. You'll need a set of tools that you can utilize to learn, adapt, and create strategies tailored to your personal strengths and unique information processing skills. You must understand your own style and accommodate it to be an effective learner and to compete at the postsecondary level. Although some techniques apply to a specific area, it is important to develop strategic problem solving skills that transfer across the curriculum.

What follows is a list of suggested study skills and strategies that may be helpful to you as you make the transition from high school to college. These suggestions are paraphrased from interviews of Mentors, Scholars, and Ambassadors in DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) at the University of Washington. As participants in DO-IT, they are either preparing for college, participating in college, or sharing their past college experiences with youth who have disabilities. Consider these suggestions as you build your own personal study skills inventory.

The following "tips of the trade" reflect their own college experiences as students with disabilities.

- Selecting an appropriate set of classes is an important first step. Talk to your academic advisor, disabled student services personnel, faculty members, and other students about classes that you are considering. Ask questions about the class format; class requirements such as amount of reading, papers assigned, type of tests given; and the instructor's teaching style.

- When you are deciding which classes to take remember to take a less demanding class along with more demanding classes each quarter or semester. This will help you balance your workload.

- Complete classes required for graduation early in your program, especially if they are subjects you are not fond of. Don't get stuck in your final year of school needing classes that create scheduling conflicts or are full.

- Try to get a copy of the class syllabus so you can see exactly what the requirements will be for a specific class.

- Purchase your textbooks a couple of weeks before the class starts if possible.

- Organize a study notebook for each class. If your notebook is sloppy and disorganized, visualize your grades in the same vein.

- Attend ALL classes! Don't sign up for a class during a time that you know other activities, such as work, will overlap or encroach upon your study time. Learning how to manage your time lowers the stress you will feel as your course work increases.

- Buy a calendar and record what you need to do each day. Write in exam dates, when papers are due, reading assignments, and scheduled study times. How much time you will need for each assignment will depend upon the length and difficulty of the assignment. Look at the assignment the day that it is assigned and start breaking it down into manageable chunks. For example, break a research paper assignment down into smaller parts, e.g., library research, read materials, develop outline, create rough draft. Schedule each task on the calendar as a daily assignment that must be completed. Allow extra time in the schedule. That way if you hit a snag you have time to deal with it. Don't procrastinate. Work within your scheduled timeframe, and stay ahead of homework assignments.

- Schedule a specific time each day for studying. Plan this time during your "alert" times of the day, not the times when you are ready to go to sleep or are hungry. Study your most difficult or least favorite subject first.

- Take study breaks. Avoid marathon study sessions and cramming.

- Grab stolen moments of time to study or review material. You can read or study flash cards in the waiting room at the doctor's office or while you are on the bus.

- Try to study when you are relaxed and not when you are upset or unable to concentrate on the work you have to do.

- The environment in which you study is important. Choose a location where you feel comfortable, that is quiet, and that is free from distractions. It is often helpful to study in the same conditions in which you will be tested. This means that if you can't eat, drink or listen to music during the exam, try to study under similar constraints.

- Study groups are great for clarifying some concepts but they should be used to complement personal study time – not replace it. Study groups can digress into discussions about the instructor or other students; try to stay on track. Be sure to read all the necessary material before a study group meeting so that you can contribute to the discussions and maximize your benefit from the meeting.

- Become familiar with the book and begin reading the first chapters before the class starts. This way, when the instructor assigns chapters 1-3 to be read by the end of the first week you will be ahead of schedule. If you

have received a copy of the syllabus early this will help in determining which chapter to begin with as not all texts are read straight through.

- Keep up with the assigned readings, being sure to read the information that will be reviewed in class prior to that class session. By doing this you will be familiar with the vocabulary and the concepts about which the lecturer is speaking, and you can bring up any questions from the reading that the professor may not have addressed during the lecture. Reading ahead will also help you take better notes on the material.

- When you start reading a text, first scan or survey the chapter you are about to read. Look at the pictures, graphs, and headings. Write down vocabulary words that are foreign to you. Look the words up in the glossary or a dictionary before you start reading the chapter. Read the chapter summary and any study questions the author has provided. Ask yourself what you already know about the material to be covered in the chapter.

- When you read a chapter, mark important information as you read. Use a highlighter, underline, or place a check mark in the margins next to the information. If you mark the entire page you are marking too much information; mark just enough to jog your memory.

- Read in short time blocks. You will remember more of what you read than if you undertake marathon reading sessions.

- After you have completed reading and marking the chapter go back and write concise notes about the material you have marked. Stick with the basic facts and information that was new to you.

- When taking notes in class use short phrases rather than whole sentences. Develop your own set of abbreviations or shorthand. Leave some room in the margins for additional information the lecturer may add later. If you become confused or miss some information mark it with a "?" and ask to have the information clarified then or after class or look up the topic in the text later.

- If you have trouble taking notes, find someone in the class who takes good notes and ask if they would be willing to give you a copy of them. Continue to take your own notes because listening to the lecture and writing notes at the same time helps you remember the information better. Then check them against the other set of notes after class. Look at the information your classmate is recording and use this example to improve your note-taking skills. You may also want to consider tape recording lectures, and then listening to the tapes while reviewing both sets of notes. Be sure to obtain the lecturer's permission before taping a lecture.

- If you need assistance, ask the instructor for help right away, not after you are failing a class.

- Contact the office of disability support services on your campus.

In summary, to maximize your success in college:

1. Develop strategies, study skills and a network of support!
2. Attend class.
3. Arrive on time, pay attention, and participate in class discussions and activities.
4. Talk to the instructor. Ask questions.
5. Complete and check all work. Turn in neat and clear assignments.
6. Monitor your progress. If you begin to fall behind, ask for help.
7. Stay in contact with the office of disability support services and your professors.

Adapt these tips to fit your unique learning style and needs. Ask friends and classmates about the techniques they use. Never be afraid to try a new method. And, remember that you are responsible for your successes as well as your failures!

## References

Carman, Robert A., and Adams, W. Royce. (1984). Study Skills, A Students Guide for Survival (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

McGuire, Joan M., Hall, Debora., and Litt, A. Vivienne. (1991). A field-based study of the direct service needs of college students with learning disabilities. Journal of College Student Development, 32, 101-108.

## Resources

- Electronic materials are abundant on the Internet. A good starting point is the DO-IT World Wide Web home page at *http://www.washington.edu/doit/*

- To discuss issues pertaining to individuals with disabilities and their pursuit of challenging academic and career fields, including science, engineering, and mathematics, subscribe to the doitsem discussion list by sending electronic mail to *listproc@u.washington.edu*. In the message text type "subscribe doitsem" followed by your full name.

- If you are interested in discussing disability-related issues that pertain to students with disabilities who are transferring from a two-year community college to a four-year college, join the doit2-4 electronic discussion list. The list is used as a forum to discuss a wide range of college, employment and disability-related issues. To subscribe to the list send an electronic mail message to *listproc@u.washington.edu* with "subscribe doit2-4" followed by your full name.

- DO-IT maintains a large collection of free publications. For a list of these publications contact DO-IT.

## Videotapes

A 14-minute videotape and brochure about college preparation, *College: You Can DO-IT!*, may be ordered by sending a check for $25 to DO-IT.

A 12-minute videotape about transitioning from a two-year to four-year post-secondary institution, *Moving On: The Two-Four Step* may be ordered by sending a check for $25 to DO-IT.

A 9-minute videotape and brochure about the student-professor relationship entitled *Working Together: Faculty and Students with Disabilities* may be ordered by sending a check for $25 to DO-IT.

Grants and gifts fund DO-IT publications, videotapes, and programs to support the academic and career success of people with disabilities. Contribute today by sending a check to DO-IT, Box 355670, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195-5670.

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