

# Success in College

Advice and Strategies from College Students  
and College Graduates who have  
Developmental Disabilities



**Supported Life Institute**

College Students and Professionals with Disabilities Project



# Introduction

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“College Students and Professionals with Disabilities” is a project designed to help people who have developmental disabilities and their families learn about resources, options, and strategies to help them succeed in college and employment. The project features videotaped interviews with individuals who have developmental disabilities discussing their experiences in college and at work.

The idea for this video library originated with four self advocacy leaders. Zachary Miller, Dr. David Nisson, Amanda Parker, and Theodore Walker wanted to support and encourage other people who have developmental disabilities to pursue their goals.

*The four of us are examples of what a person can overcome if they have the right tools and they have the right resources to navigate their way through college....You have to learn to take the first steps. To ask. To know what to ask.*

*-Theo, Introduction video*

Quotes throughout this booklet are the experiences, suggestions and insights of the individuals in the videos. You can watch their videos on the YouTube Channel “College Students and Professionals with Disabilities” and search by the individual’s name.

*What I hope people get out of the videos is that they feel encouraged, that they don’t feel like they have to be excluded and abandon their dreams. But also that they learn lessons about what could go wrong and what to anticipate.*

*-David, Introduction video*

The individuals who were interviewed generously shared their experiences, advice, and encouragement. Each person interviewed wanted to help others avoid pitfalls and have a successful college experience.

*They really learn from us, our stories, then they say,  
“Oh wow, I didn’t know I could get this service and  
that service.”*

*-Zachary, Introduction video*

*...I feel like it is encouraging them that they can do  
it, so that they try to do it.*

*-Amanda, Introduction video*

Throughout this booklet, look for text boxes for links to resources:

To see the videos, go to the YouTube Channel: “College Students and Professionals with Disabilities” which can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmyYkP-t1xXY3WpQbL5Ju4A> Search for the person’s name to find their video.

“College Students and Professionals with Disabilities” was coordinated by the Supported Life Institute and funded by a grant from the California State Council on Developmental Disabilities, Sacramento office.

Wishing you all the best on your journey!

Cindy Ruder  
Project Coordinator  
College Students and Professionals with Disabilities

# I don't know if I want to go to college or not

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*I just knew I wanted to go to college and have the college experience.*

*-Sheril*

Not everyone is as certain of what they want as Sheril was. If you're not sure if you want go to college, you can go to a college campus and spend some time there to get a feel for the campus. You can sign up for a college tour, or you can just explore the campus on your own.

The people interviewed in the videos decided that going to college was worthwhile for them.

*I feel like it's worth it to go to college because not only do you better your education, it also helps you learn leadership skills and independence.*

*-Amanda, Introduction video*

*... And discipline. You have to have the self-discipline to be able to get up in the morning, to go to campus, to show up on time. It's really a dress rehearsal for what one will do in the work world. You know, you go to work, the employer expects you to show up on time.*

*-Theodore, Introduction video*

Many of the college students who were interviewed suggested trying out college by taking just one or two classes to start with, or starting with classes like physical education that are less academic.

*It's really worth it to go to further your education and get more knowledge of things.*

*-Zachary, Introduction video*

Lisa talked about why going to college makes you more valuable to an employer:

*You show an employer that you have skills beyond a high school diploma and you're willing to learn new and different things that will make you more marketable and valuable to an employer. And hopefully that will lead to advancement or promotions or other opportunities.*

*-Lisa*

*I think another reason disabled people should go to college is that each disabled person has a certain passion and a lot of times if you have a certain passion you want to turn that into a profession. And if we're excluded from college then we really don't have the opportunity to devote our lives to what we want our lives to be about.*

*-David, Introduction video*

# What can I do to get ready for college?

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Several people who were interviewed talked about their specific challenges for learning in college and how they overcame those challenges. For college and work (and life!) it is very helpful if you understand YOU: what makes it hard for you to learn, what causes you anxiety, what impacts your self-confidence. And importantly, know what helps you to learn, what helps you to deal with anxiety, what helps you to feel confident, what helps you to succeed.

*It's really important to really understand specifically how you as a person work, how you learn. Basically, just knowing yourself.*

*-Issac*

*I have a verbal processing issue that causes me to miss instructions when they're delivered to me verbally. The other people in my laboratory, my colleagues, they were able to have procedures demonstrated to them with one shot and then be able to stay safe and do them correctly, whereas in my case, I needed them to be demonstrated to me multiple times to really remember them so I wouldn't make a mistake.*

*-David*

*I established relationships with, informal relationships, with a lot of my professors. They helped me through. They gave me confidence to believe in myself.*

*-Stacy*

*I have a lot of social anxiety. I have a hearing loss. When I was in my other classes, things would get a little loud. I have a little bit of sensory overload. I was able to step outside of class.*

*-Jessica*

*I have a hard time with auditory memory but sometimes I felt it was better if I sat at the front of the class and I actually watched the professor.*

*-Joshua*

If you use any type of technology, such as note taking tools, a communication device, or software, obtain it and use it while you're still in high school. It will be much easier for you in the new environment of college if you are already comfortable using your technology.

*I received...assistive technology, which made a big difference for me. I used Dragon NaturallySpeaking, which helped me a lot. I used some other software programs. And the programs varied for me and the reasons for that is because my tics from my Tourette's varied. So if my vocal tics were really bad, I couldn't use Dragon. And then if my motor tics were really bad, I couldn't use anything with a keyboard or a mouse. So it was necessary that I knew how to use multiple types of assistive technology.*

*-Stacy*

Stacy did not have the opportunity to practice using technology in high school because she didn't receive special education services and didn't know what accommodations were. Stacy was able to figure out the combination of assistive technology and other supports that worked for her in college. Her early college career could have been easier if she had supports in place from the start. Fortunately, Stacy persevered and, as she says, every time she was knocked down she got back up.

# What can I do to be successful in college?

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*Getting signed up with the disabled student center because they have a lot of services that can help people with disabilities and the classes. And they offer a wide range of accommodations.*

*-Joshua*

*I signed up for tutors whether I needed help in the subjects or not...I didn't wait until I was failing. That way I knew I was being held accountable. I met with my math tutor every Monday, so I had to know the assignment. And that helped me stay on top of my lessons.*

*-Stacy*

*I would write down what your short-term goals are for college, and long term.*

*-Sheril*

*I went to the community college instead of going from the high school directly to UC Davis. That was a helpful transition for me to go from the high school to the community college to the big university instead of going directly there because that allowed me to adjust to the new environments more easily.*

*-David*

*Definitely ease into it. Don't do all classes at once. Do one or two, gradually go into it. Because it can become overwhelming really fast and really quick.*

*-Jeffrey*



*Always had a study buddy. In the class, whatever class I had. I became friends with somebody in the classroom.*

*-Sheril*

*I would be familiar with the campus, know where everything is. One thing that I did every semester is I would map out my classes beforehand so I knew exactly where they were and I didn't have to struggle finding my class.*

*-Joshua*

## Accommodations and other support in college

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Colleges and universities have departments to assist students who have disabilities. These departments are often called “Disabled Students Programs and Services” (DSPS) but may be called by a different name, such as “Services to Students with Disabilities” or “Student Disability Center”. These services are free to students.

*I used the DSPS, which is the disabled student center. They gave me extra test time and I was able to get note takers. The DSPS is not just for offering services but they do offer counselors.*

*-Joshua*

*Well first we called to make an appointment...and after meeting we went and took the assessment test. I went in, took my test, had another meeting...we went over the results, which is where he addresses the different resources that are available, from extra testing time, to parking passes, the bus passes.*

*-Jeffrey*

*I got my book on CD so I can read it myself on my device. Every student who gets accommodations gets a paper at the start of every semester that tells the teacher their accommodations.*

*-Gena*

*From the disability center I got help with writing, and I can't write so I took my tests in there because I needed a longer test time.*

*-Rebecca*

*I had note taking, I had extra time on tests, quiet room for tests, I had various assistive technology in the classroom: voice recorder to record lectures, Kurzweil to read my books and help with note taking, and peers to do study groups with. I also met with a counselor at school to help me with counseling on various classes to take.*

*-Amanda*

*I received books in an alternative format, and testing in a quiet room, scribes for my writing.*

*-Stacy*

*Definitely have note takers. It's hard keeping up with them talking as fast as they do, and trying to retain all that, and keep all that. They talk real fast, and I don't write as fast. And my brain doesn't keep up that fast with all they're saying.*

*-Jeffrey*

*The assistive technology with the computer, that's helped me be able to complete class assignments.*

*-Lisa*

For information about your rights to receive accommodations in higher education, see Disability Rights California's publications:

<https://www.disabilityrightsca.org/publications/what-are-my-rights-to-accommodations-in-higher-education-fact-sheet>

If you use or may benefit from using assistive technology, check to see if your college has a technology center. Technology centers may be housed separately from DSPS. The staff at technology centers have expertise in equipment and software that can help with learning differences as well as physical disabilities. They can help you identify the technology that will help you in college and they may loan approved equipment while you are in college. Examples of common assistive technology are tools to help take effective notes and reading textbooks out loud to make it easier to complete written assignments.

If you receive services from a California regional center, there are services available that can provide support for you in college. Talk with your regional center service coordinator about your goals and the support you need to be successful in college.

*For note taking I actually used an outside agency, Progressive Employment Concepts, funded by Alta. I was able to have my support facilitator come into my class and take notes for me. So that is how I passed, because I had my support facilitator coming in, and they knew how my brain worked, and they knew how I understand things.*

*-Jessica*

Some individuals had support from personal assistants through In-Home Supportive Services.

*A lot of people on the outside, other than the school system, helped me. My in home services staff helped me get ready every day....I let my staff know that on certain days, when I had school, I didn't care about the house work or the house stuff or going shopping. School was important. Just help me get out the door, help me get home.*

*-Sheril*

*One thing my personal assistant did in the laboratory was to make sure that I was wearing all the correct personal protective equipment for what I was going to be doing.*

*-David*

**In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) helps pay for services to help people with disabilities stay safely in their own home. The types of services include housecleaning, meal preparation, laundry, grocery shopping, personal care (such as bathing, grooming), and transportation to medical appointments. For more information go to [www.cdss.ca.gov/In-Home-Supportive-Services](http://www.cdss.ca.gov/In-Home-Supportive-Services)**

# Is there any help to pay for college?

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Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) offers academic and support counseling, financial aid and other support services. EOPS' goal is to encourage students disadvantaged by language, social, economic, and educational circumstances to meet their goals in college. EOPS programs are available at California community colleges.

*Extended Opportunity for Students, they helped me with figuring out my financial aid, and how that would work. And figuring out if I needed more help other than financial aid, as far as getting books, sometimes supplying books.....They help you keep track of your grades, help you learn how to manage your school classes, schedule.*

*-Sheril*

*The BOG is a big one because it helps pay for your classes so many people with disabilities are eligible for the BOG.*

*-Joshua*

Board of Governors (BOG) Fee Waivers can pay for enrollment fees at California Community Colleges. Other assistance is available to buy books and supplies. Go to [www.icanaffordcollege.com](http://www.icanaffordcollege.com)

*A PASS from Social Security. It helped me pay for a tutor.*

*-Charles*

A Plan to Achieve Self Support (PASS) is a written plan for getting a particular kind of job or starting a business. A PASS can pay for things to help you achieve your work goal, such as education or training, transportation, or assistive technology. For more information go to [www.socialsecurity.gov/online/ssa-545.htm](http://www.socialsecurity.gov/online/ssa-545.htm) or call a PASS Specialist at 1-800-772-1213.

The California Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) can pay for career education and training. DOR can pay for your education expenses if your employment goal will lead to competitive employment.

*I paid for...half of college by becoming a client of the Department of Rehabilitation.*

*-Lisa*

For more information about services available from the Department of Rehabilitation, go to [www.dor.ca.gov/Vocational-Rehabilitation.html](http://www.dor.ca.gov/Vocational-Rehabilitation.html)

Disability Rights California has a helpful fact sheet on DOR's Educational and Training Services:  
<https://www.disabilityrightsca.org/publications/educational-and-training-services-through-the-california-department-of-rehabilitation>

The office of Federal Student Aid can also help you pay for college by providing grants, loans, and work-study funds. You can apply for student aid using the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

For more information about FAFSA or to apply go to  
<https://FAFSA.gov>

## What if my class is too hard for me?

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Many of the individuals who were interviewed had times when they struggled in a class. Everyone agreed that it's important to ask professors for help.

*Yeah, there were many times where there was something that I didn't understand and so I would go to the instructor's office hours...and I'd go in there and ask them questions and then they would help break down what I was having trouble with.*

*-Joshua*

*Don't be afraid to ask your instructors for help.....a lot of people, even typical people, have issues asking teachers for help. I've always found that they love to answer questions for students that were dedicated to the class and want you to succeed.*

*-Joshua*

*Ask for help if you need it, definitely ask for help. It's a big one. What I liked though was that I saw everyone else that weren't disabled asking for help. And that kind of made me feel comfortable so I liked that.*

*-Jeffrey*

*I was, at the beginning, pretty nervous actually about going to my instructors and saying, “Hey, I don’t understand this.” ...They want you to actually come to them if you have any problems, so you can be successful.*

*-Issac*

It may be helpful to you to meet with your professor early in the term and regularly if you don’t understand any class material. It’s generally not a good idea to wait until the week before final exams to meet with a professor if any of the material is confusing.

## College Options

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If you go to college, you don’t have to work towards a degree.

*For me, I went the route of certificates. You don’t have to have an associates (degree). You can look into the college’s programs and see what certificates they have so you can look for more of getting a job rather than having that associates.*

*-Jessica*

If you start down one path then change your mind, it’s okay.

*I didn’t know what degree I wanted. Don’t be afraid to know that you might change your mind in what your degree is.*

*-Sheril*



*I started right at Sac State and then I decided after a couple of semesters there that it was not the best transition for me. So I went to community college. It took me a while to get back to Sac State.*

*-Amanda*

To find the right school for him, Issac interviewed colleges

*I got there (community college), and went over so much information, and so much content in just, on the first day, that I became completely overwhelmed. Couldn't do it and just had to drop it....I did go to another school...that wasn't necessarily a college, it was a trade school. It's very specialized for what I wanted to do. That worked out really well. So then what we did is we would go to one of the schools, have an interview with the people in charge, get a feel for the school, get a feel for how receptive they were to having someone with a disability there, what their strategy would be for teaching someone like that.*

*-Issac*

## Advice and Encouragement

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*Try your best. If you fail a class don't worry. You can retake the class again....And never give up on your goals and your dreams.*

*-Gena*

*Don't be afraid to fail. It's okay. Most likely you will not get there on the first try. But that's okay.*

*-Jessica*

*Don't be afraid to disclose your disability because if you do you'll be able to get access to services for your disability...*

*-Lisa*

*Don't give up even if it takes you longer.*

*-Sheril*

*My advice to people in college is there's people that can graduate in 2 and 4 years, like 2 years for the community college, 4 years for the university, and like 2 years for graduate school. Take school at your own pace. Don't try to do what everyone else does. Just do things the way you want to do it.*

*-Wesley*

*If you are going to college you need to stand up for yourself because you are the only one that knows what you want and need.*

*-Alexa*

*This is really about equipping young people with the necessary tools and skills to be able to navigate and advocate for themselves.*

*-Theodore, Introduction video*

THANK YOU to all of the college students and college graduates who generously shared their experiences and encouragement.