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**PLUS 6 VIEWPOINT COLUMNS
FROM ASSOCIATION LEADERS**

HOW TO APPROACH THE COLLEGE SEARCH PROCESS WHEN YOU HAVE A DISABILITY: TYPICAL OR ATYPICAL?



By Kevin M.R. Mayne

The recently released third season of the popular Netflix program *Atypical* follows protagonist Sam Gardner, a student with autism, to his freshmen year at college. Throughout the episodes in the season, the storyline centers around how he navigates the academic and social expectations of his new campus environment. The challenges Sam faces aren't unique to students with learning differences and the episodes have been praised by members of the autism community for their emphasis that this is merely one student's experience, not a blanket statement about all neurodivergent students. However, when it comes to applying to colleges when you have a learning disability, there are some typical and atypical questions upon which you may wish to focus. There are more than 4,000 public, private, and for-profit colleges and universities in the United States. Searching for the "right college" can be time-consuming, stressful, and often chaotic. If you're a student who happens to learn differently this task can seem downright

overwhelming. Yet, it doesn't have to be. Instead, it can be a very rewarding experience. The college search process is a journey of self-discovery. Because of this, the possibilities that are available to you are numerous and exciting - that is, if you ask yourself the right questions and take the correct steps.

How do you make the right college match? We all know that every student has individual priorities and needs, hopes, and dreams. The college search process is a journey of self-discovery, and for students with a disability there is an additional layer to that process beyond such basic criteria as geography, program of study, and size of school. Should you consider a college that is dedicated exclusively to students with learning disabilities and/or focuses on specific types of learning challenges such as dyslexia, ADHD, or ASD? Or would you be better served by a traditional college that offers LD accommodations at the comprehensive, structured, or add-on services level?

Eight considerations for evaluating which college options are best suited to your particular learning style:

UNDERSTANDING

Do you know your LD and how it affects your ability to learn? It might surprise you to know that many students with LD have never read their LD testing or understand what their diagnosis is and what that means to the way in which they learn. Know yourself!

SELF-AWARENESS

Can you describe the services you received in high school and what worked and what didn't work? Not only is it important to know how you learn best, but are you aware of the tasks throughout the day that you do for yourself, that your parents do for you, or that your teachers and counselor do on your behalf? For example, do you wake up on your own in the morning? Do you plan out your day and know how to prioritize tasks? Do you take prescribed medications on your own? Be aware of...you!

ADVOCATE

Are you able to articulate your learning disability? Once you go to college, you'll have to advocate for yourself. Will you be able to talk with your professors about what accommodations you need? It may surprise you to know that only 17% of students who were eligible for support services in high school actually advocate for themselves and take advantage of accommodations once they go on to college. Put yourself out there - learn to advocate for yourself!

DISCLOSURE

Will you disclose your learning differences in your applications for admission to college? Students and their families often fear that divulging a learning disability will hurt their

chances of admission. Experts agree that disclosing is a good idea. It can help provide background information on why you may have struggled, or why grades may be high, but a particular test score low. Be a proud neurodiverse learner!

SUPPORT SERVICES

Do the colleges that you are exploring offer the support services you need? When evaluating a college, book an appointment with their disability office. Find out what types of services they offer. Do their services match your particular needs? If you need executive function coaching or social pragmatics to be successful, make sure the colleges you are exploring offer these supports!

SUCCESS

What are the college's track record specifically for students with LD: retention, graduation, and placement rates? The college may have a great soccer team or an outstanding business program, but make sure neurodiverse students succeed, persist and graduate!

ATTITUDE/ENVIRONMENT

How accepting/what is the view of the campus community toward students with LD? Is it a warm and welcoming community, one that is inclusive of all types of neurodiversity? Ask questions, but most importantly visit. Walk around campus, talk with students and faculty, and see if you can 'see' yourself there!

360 DEGREES

Is LD support limited to just the classroom or will you be able to access services throughout all aspects of college life - on the playing field, in the residence hall, and more? If you have an LD, it doesn't disappear the moment you walk out of lecture or class. Find out how services carry over to the rest of campus life!

