



Young Adults with Brain Injury and College

Originally published in TBI Challenge! Vol.4, No. 2, 2000.
Resources updated January 2010.
by Jennifer Bunch, JD

Introduction

According to the most recent statistics, the people who are most likely to sustain brain injuries in the United States are between the ages of 15 and 24. These injuries occur when people are just beginning to venture into their independent lives, and for many people, the first step in this process is college. Anyone who has been to college knows that the college experience can produce some difficult challenges, and these challenges only are exacerbated by the presence of a brain injury. When considering the issue of attending college, a student with brain injury will most likely concentrate on answering three questions:

1. How do I choose a college setting that is right for me?
2. How do I make certain that the college I choose will provide me with the necessary accommodations to allow me to attain my educational goals?
3. How do I pay for college?

Obviously, it is impossible to provide answers to these questions that will apply to every student with a brain injury. Each student is different, and each brain injury is different. Additionally, each student's needs will be influenced by outside factors which are not related to the brain injury such as:

- the condition of the student prior to the injury
- the family support available to the student
- the community resources available to the student
- the student's life goals.

Despite these differences, there are guidelines that every student can follow to find a college setting that is right for him/her.

Unique Challenges Facing Students With Brain Injuries

Often the most difficult obstacle for a student with brain injury to overcome is an attitudinal one, and this attitudinal barrier can be stronger for students with brain injuries than for students with other disabilities. The reason for this barrier is that some high school or vocational counselors have the false impression that a student with a brain injury is incapable of succeeding in an academic environment.

This attitude can manifest itself in the form of the counselors either being unwilling to provide the necessary support for a student trying to attend college, or actively attempting to steer the student away from college toward a more vocational setting, such as trade school. If faced with this situation, a student must be assertive in expressing his/her wishes to the counselor and, if necessary, enlist the aid of a third party, such as a parent or teacher to advocate on the his/her behalf.

The second type of obstacle that a student must overcome is created by the symptoms of the brain injury itself, which can be problematic especially in an educational environment. These symptoms can include memory problems, impairments in cognitive functioning, communication issues and, most importantly, problems in executive functioning. Impairments with executive functioning can be troubling especially in college because they attack the ability to perform the very skills necessary to succeed (i.e., time management, activity planning, priority setting). In order to overcome the obstacles caused by deficits in these areas, a student may require outside help, such as time-management counseling, peer tutoring and adjustments in academic requirements. These are just some of the types of services students with brain injury should look for when trying to find a suitable college environment.

Choosing A College

When most people think of the term “college,” the first thing that comes to mind is a four-year institution that grants either a Bachelor of Sciences or Bachelor of Arts degree. This is not, however, the only option open to those seeking a college education. Community colleges or Associate programs may offer some of the best opportunities for a student with a brain injury by allowing him/her to live at home, take lighter course loads, and adjust the academic schedule around the rehabilitation program if needed. When exploring college options, a student must remember to pursue all possible avenues.

Regardless of which educational option is chosen, there is a checklist of questions that should be answered before making any decision. In researching each college, a prospective student and his/her family will want to accomplish two goals. First, they will want a clear picture of the programs and services offered at each college to accommodate the student. When polling several different colleges, students with brain injury seem to succeed in programs which offer three basic things:

- a faculty and administration that understands brain injury
- periodic faculty training on the issue of brain injury
- a flexible provision of services.

By asking the following questions, a prospective student and his/her family will be able to judge the effectiveness of these programs by hearing from sources who are not obligated to serve the purposes of the college administration:

- 1. Ask to speak with current students who have brain injuries.** If there are no students with brain injuries enrolled at that time, ask to speak with students with other disabilities. It is important to remember that even though there is not a student with a brain injury currently enrolled at the college, this does not mean that the college necessarily is unsuitable. There may have been students with brain injuries who had been well served by the school in the past.
- 2. Ask if the college tracks students with brain injuries.** If they do, where do these students end up (i.e. graduate school, employment)? Again, if they do not track students with brain injuries specifically, ask about students with other types of disabilities that may be similar, such as learning disabilities or other neurological disorders.
- 3. Ask about the retention rate of students with brain injuries and/or other similar disabilities.**
- 4. Ask what types of in-service support the institution offers faculty in order to train them to accommodate students with disabilities.** This is important especially when dealing with brain injury, since it is a widely misunderstood condition with symptoms that sometimes can be mistaken for carelessness, laziness or neglect of studies. If the faculty members understand this, it can prevent them from punishing a student for something that is not willful misconduct.
- 5. Ask how accommodations are determined and granted by the college administration, particularly whether these accommodations are determined according to the student's Individualized Educational Plan (IEP).** This could be a crucial obstacle to students with brain injuries, many of whom may not have been identified as needing additional services in high school, and therefore would have no IEPs to rely on for suggested accommodations.
- 6. Ask about the college's flexibility in granting accommodations.** For instance, if a system of accommodations is formulated at the beginning of a semester and in the middle of the semester it is determined that the program is not working, would the members of the faculty be willing to sit down with the student again and formulate a new program, or would it simply be assumed that the student could not succeed in college?

Paying For College

It would be wonderful if there were scholarships specifically designated for students who have sustained brain injuries. Unfortunately, this is not the case. This does not mean that there are not scholarships for which students with brain injuries may be eligible. For example, there are several scholarships available for students who are blind or visually impaired. Since brain injuries can cause impairments in vision, students with this type of injury would be eligible for these scholarships. The same would be true of scholarships for students with hearing and mobility impairments, as well as learning disabilities. There also are scholarships that have nothing at all to do with physical disabilities. Scholarships exist for students who fit into certain categories totally separate from disability. There are

scholarships available for students who fit into certain ethnic groups, religious groups or civic organizations. There also are scholarships available to students according to their chosen field of study or institution.

There are several different sources—both online and in print—which can point students in the right direction to obtain various types of financial aid for college. If one does not have home internet access, the local public library will offer this service at no charge. Some resources that may help in this search include:

- www.fastweb.com : A free internet search engine for state financial aid resources. It also offers other resources such as reading materials about applying for different types of scholarships, grants and government funding.
- www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/index. The site for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Secondary Education, which highlights available government resources and the application process.
- www.scholarships.com – a free internet search tool for college scholarships.
- www.fastaid.com An online scholarship search engine with search hints, tips from students who have been through the process and other reading material.
- www.collegescholarships.org/search/helpful-reviews.htm – a review of a range of scholarship search engines.
- <http://staff.lib.msu.edu/harris23/grants/3disable.htm> - List of Educational Grants for the Disabled
- www.collegeaid.com/ - free search engine for college scholarships.
- www.scholarshipworkshop.com/highschool.html - lists scholarships available for high school students looking to attend college.

There also are some informative books on the subject including:

Foundation Grants To Individuals, 11th Edition: Edited by Phyllis Edelson and Rebecca Alvin, this book was published by The Foundation Center in 1999. This book contains a listing of grants (at least \$2000 annually) available to individuals according to different categories, including everything from disability and ethnic group to race. This book can be obtained through your local library. This database of resources is also available on their website

<http://foundationcenter.org/findfunders/fundingsources/gtio.html>

“College Costs and Financial Aid Handbook” (College Board). Includes an outline of major aid programs, a discussion of how financial need is determined and a look at college costs.

"The Scholarship Book" by Daniel J. Cassidy (Prentice Hall). This book is a guide to private sector scholarships, grants and loans.

Financial Aid For The Disabled And Their Families: Written by Gail Ann Schlacter and David R. Weber, this book was published by Reference Service Press in 1998 (ISBN 0-918276-65-9) for \$40.00 plus \$4.50 postage and handling. This 350-page book includes more than 800 entries, organized according to type of disability and covering domestic and international fellowships for pre-doctoral and post-doctoral students. To order a copy, call (415) 594-0743, fax (415) 594-0411, or write to Reference Service Press, 1100 Industrial Road, Suite 9, San Carlos, CA 94070-4131.

As you examine these sources, please be aware that they are but a sample of the resources that are available. As with most other issues related to brain injury, the people who obtain the necessary resources are the ones who assert themselves and demand them. A person who has sustained a brain injury can be successful in a college environment with the right resources.