

Crossing
Your Fingers
Is Not
A Strategy



Steps to Take Before Sending Your Student to College

by Katherine McGavern

SPRING BRINGS NEW BEGINNINGS, and every spring brings at least one new client to my ADHD coaching practice from a familiar new-beginning category: the college student with ADHD who has flunked out. And each time I listen to yet another sad story of decline and failure, I find myself wishing that I'd had the chance to speak to this student's parents *before the student left for college*. If I had had that opportunity, this is what I would share with them.

First, take a moment to consider the underlying, often taken-for-granted structure of your student's K-12 life, and see how that will compare to a normal college experience. Ask yourself the following questions and consider the responses that apply to your child.

1 In your student's K-12 life, who has been involved in helping him manage his *day-to-day responsibilities*—his performance and participation in, and behavior during, school and extracurricular activities, and social life?

K-12: Parents, siblings, relatives, classroom teachers, classroom aides, school coaches, instructors, parents of friends, ancillary school staff (guidance counselors, extracurricular teachers), carpool drivers, chaperones, sports and after-school coaches, doctors, music teachers, and all orthodontist office secretaries.

COLLEGE: NO ONE

2 During grades K-12, what strategies and tools were in place to make sure your student was doing what she needed to be doing—*on a daily basis*—to succeed?

K-12:

- Daily tracking of attendance, lateness, absence, assignments completed, assignments still due, class participation quality and quantity
- Frequent ongoing metrics (grades on quizzes, papers, exams, labs, etc.), shared with the student, parents, and other teachers as appropriate
- Written reports at regular intervals (five-week reports, warnings as needed, quarterly report cards)



reflecting real-time performance, including problems or areas of weakness that need more focus

- Regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences K-8; conferences available upon request grades 9-12
- Ongoing email and internet access available to keep parents, teachers, and students on the same page at any given moment

COLLEGE:

- Occasional attendance-taking (easily faked)
- On average, 0-3 grades during the semester per course
- The final grade

3 How many people have oversight or awareness of your student's *personal habits and social activities*, such as eating, sleeping, exercise, substance use or abuse, unsupervised travel and entertainment, and overall well-being?

K-12:

- On the frontline: parents, siblings, relatives, friends' parents
- To a lesser degree: classroom teachers, classroom aides, school coaches, instructors, ancillary school staff (guidance counselors, extracurricular teachers), carpool drivers, chaperones, sports and after-school coaches, doctors.

COLLEGE:

Maybe a roommate? More likely: NO ONE.

ONCE PARENTS FOCUS on this complex—and largely invisible—web of people and systems that insured their student's successful completion of K-12, it should become clear that sending a student with ADHD off to college with no structural or organizational assists of any kind is asking for trouble—and not fair! That college trouble can range from poor academic performance—even failure, to severe anxiety, depression, and feelings of deep shame and disappointment—not to mention the lost semester, the lost tuition, and the need to start the college process over. These are dismal outcomes, indeed.

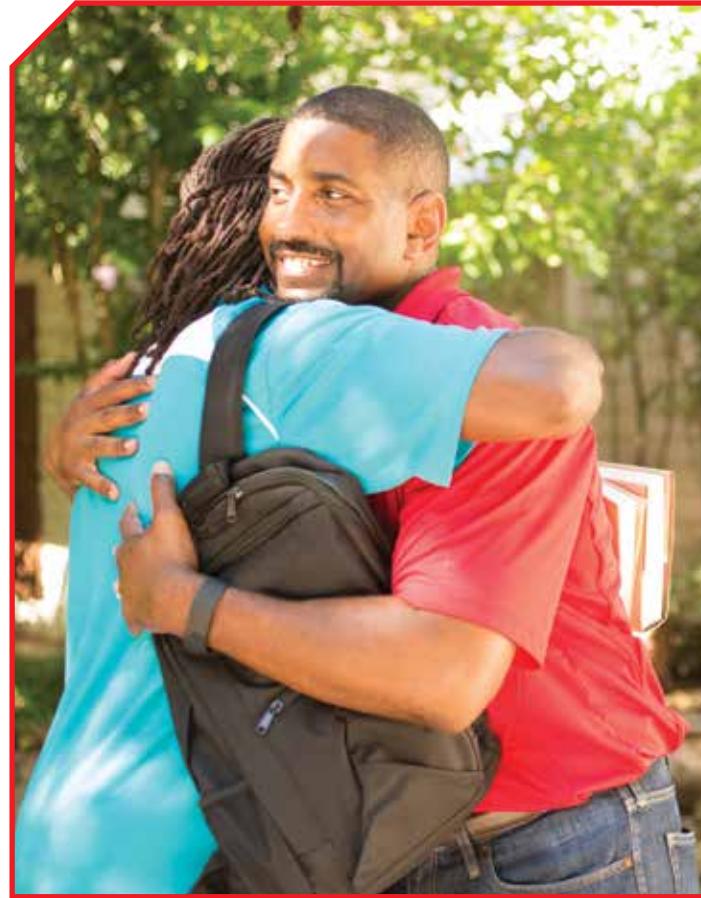
Even if you have selected a college with your student's ADHD in mind—one with small class sizes or one that claimed to favor individualized learning—you must still be proactive on behalf of your student before you drop him or her off.

Here are some steps you (NOT your student) can take right now, whether your fledgling has already flown (for Orientation), or is still awaiting the big Drop-Off Day.

1 **If you haven't already, create a complete file of all your student's ADHD documents.** This file must include all diagnoses and evaluations (not just the most recent ones) with all provider contact information; all school accommodations to date; a complete medication history, with information on side effects and reasons for medication changes as needed; all other diagnoses – learning disabilities, coexisting conditions from past to present, such as depression, eating disorders, OCD, etc.; and any other relevant information. Your student will need some or all of this information to qualify for accommodations on campus, and in any case, this is an important file to keep up-to-date.

The next step involves conversations with campus personnel. The best way for you to be effective would be to go to the campus and meet with the appropriate people. If you're working long distance, however, you'll need to clear some time on your calendar for telephone calls. Get comfortable and get started. *Take solid notes*, with correct names, job positions, and dates of all calls or conversations.

2 **Contact the Office for Student Disabilities at the college.** This step involves conversations with campus personnel. The best way for you to be effective would be to go to the campus and meet with the appropriate people. If you're working long distance, however, you'll need to clear some time on your calendar for telephone calls. Get comfortable and get started. *Take solid notes*, with correct names, job positions, and dates of all calls or conversations.



Start with the switchboard or information desk, because this office goes by different names on different campuses. Find out who would be **the go-to person** for freshman student intake and subsequent decisions about accommodations. If possible, speak to that person. You need to start a relationship with this person, and have them know you are your student's active advocate in this process. Ask the following questions:

- **What accommodations are available?** Ask them to fax or email all their printed info on specific accommodations offered.
- **What type of ADHD evaluation is required by the school in order for the student to be eligible for accommodations?**
- **What is the official timeframe for the student's ADHD evaluation?** Some ask for an evaluation done within three years, others within five.
- **What are acceptable evaluator credentials for the evaluation to be approved?**
- **How long does it take to put accommodations in place?**
- **Are there any additional resources for incoming students that would benefit yours?** Examples include a writing center, time management classes, subject-specific tutors, weekly individualized coaching, etc. Extra costs?
- **Will your student's advisor be knowledgeable about ADHD?** Aware of the possibility that four courses



might be better than five the first semester, or the importance of dropping a course that the student clearly can't manage? Avoiding 8 AM courses? Overall semester work load sensitivity?

- **Are there mental health resources (therapy) available for your student?** What does your student have to do to get help? Cost?
- **What grades or GPA will result in the student being asked to leave the college?** Is there any early warning system in place for ADHD students who may not realize they're in serious academic trouble?
- **Can you make a date to meet this person, with your student, on Drop-Off Day?** At that meeting can your student sign a Release of Information, so you can be kept informed as the campus experience unfolds?

3 Call the Student Health Service (the name of this department may vary), and ask them if they will prescribe your student's ADHD medications while she or he is on campus. Ask what documents or information will be required for this service, and whether there is a cost. If they do not prescribe medications, whom do they recommend for your student to work with locally?

4 Call the office of the Dean of Students. The dean of students generally oversees the majority of things that relate to student life outside the college classroom.

Ask the following questions:

- How is the campus organized socially? Are there fraternities and sororities? (With their own housing?) Cost?
- Are there dorm affiliations, eating clubs, or other social resources for students who don't pledge a fraternity?
- What are the rules and regulations re campus parties, including alcohol policies and infraction consequences?

This information will help you clarify the fine print your student may miss about, for example, what behaviors will land them in the dean's office on probation. It will also give you the opportunity to speak candidly and clearly (one last time) with your student about what you expect of their conduct while away at school.

5 Go to CHADD.org and find the CHADD chapter closest to the campus. Call the chapter coordinator and get information on all the ADHD resources in the area—coaches, prescribing professionals, therapists, tutors, etc. It's better to have this info *before* you need it!

NOW THAT YOU'RE FULLY INFORMED, sit down with your student and decide together which resources and strategies will be most helpful, and what steps are needed to put them in place. Write it all down.

Start by clarifying why you're having this conversation, sharing the information at the beginning of the article about all the elements that kept him or her on track in grades K through 12. Then let your student know what's available on campus. Make decisions together based on your student's particular ADHD challenges: Time management? Temptation management? Financial management? Personal care management (eating, sleeping, waking, exercise)? Procrastination management?

Follow-up will take time, but you will be sending your son or daughter off on this breathtaking life adventure with the knowledge that you've got their back, and that you understand that their best shot at success will come from having a team, trained and ready, to help your son or daughter succeed—in college and beyond.

Good job, Mom and Dad. ☺

Katherine McGavern coaches adults with ADHD and is a certified Parent to Parent teacher. She gives presentations on ADHD to teachers (K-12), community organizations, and parent groups; provides training on ADHD to student teachers at The College of New Jersey; and is a member of the editorial advisory board of Attention. McGavern is a cofounding member of CHADD Mercer County, and facilitates their monthly meetings in Princeton, New Jersey.