

By Brenda Battat



From the Executive Director's Desk

Going to College with a Hearing Loss


The college application process can be stressful for anyone but even more so for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities, whether seniors in high school or older students returning to school, often select mainstream colleges for their education. This is the result of more appropriate hearing aids, a plethora of assistive devices, the rising popularity of implantable devices, and disability rights laws. Further, the first generation of children implanted with cochlear implants as toddlers are now in their college years and they are just the beginning of a rapidly growing wave.

The transition from the school environment where the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees an education as a right, to one in which nothing is guaranteed in college, can be extremely challenging for students. In a mainstream college, the only law is one that requires that individuals put up their hands, identify themselves and request the communication support they need. There is no such thing as postsecondary "special education."

Too often, young adults do not request needed accommodations or even disclose their hearing loss. Parents often take the lead in advocating for their children's educational rights in primary and secondary schools. As a result the young adult may lack the self-advocacy skills, assertiveness, and knowledge about technology that can benefit them in the classroom. Older returning students may not be familiar with the technology that is available to help them. I went back to school in my mid-forties (pre-ADA) and used an FM system in all my classes. Without this assistive listening device, I would not have gotten my master's degree.

Consequently, the transition to college may turn out to be an unnecessarily difficult one with the worst-case scenarios of semesters missed due to lack of communication supports, to scenarios of the stress of working double time to keep up with their peers who do not have hearing loss. Further, in a mainstream setting, students with hearing loss lack interaction with other young or older adults with hearing loss to share and exchange information and ideas. It can be a lonely experience.

HAAA and other organizations have helpful resources to cope with entering college—how and where to research a college and the accessibility provided; what questions to ask; self advocacy skills; assistive technology for use in the classroom, on campus and off; legal rights; working with the disability services office; guidance for parents on letting go; interview practice and role playing; seeking a mentor; and building relationships with faculty, among other things.

Our cover story this issue features Alexa Vasiliadis, a lovely, talented, confident high school junior who wears a hearing aid. Alexa is not timid about telling people about her hearing loss and asking others to repeat or advising teachers how to communicate with her. She is just starting her research to choose a college. We will try to keep up with her and see what she decides and what her experiences are when she gets there. Meanwhile, enjoy the story and photos. 

Brenda Battat is executive director of Hearing Loss Association of America. She can be reached at Battat@hearingloss.org.

For More Information

How to Get the Most Out of College
www.hearingloss.org/docs/Get_the_Most.pdf

Starting Off on the Right Foot: Transition to College, Planning Advice from Professionals and Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

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