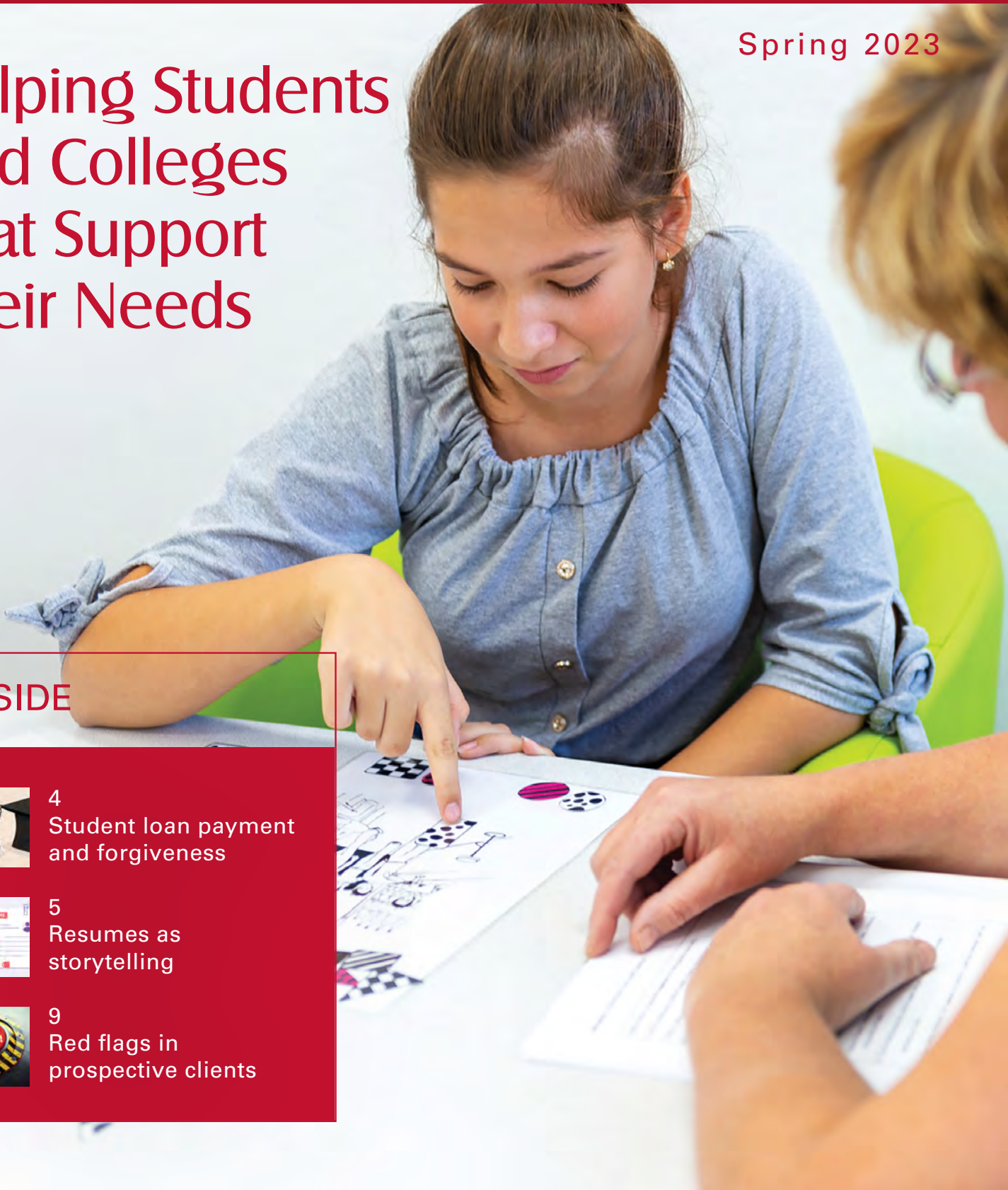


Member-to-Member

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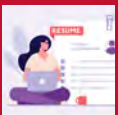
Helping Students Find Colleges That Support Their Needs



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Helping Students Find Colleges That Support Their Needs

By Sherri Maxman, IECA (NY), Chair of the LD/ND Committee; Gina Gerrato, MA, IECA (CA); and Elizabeth Cooper, JD, IECA (MA)

We hear it all the time, especially from parents of students with learning differences: “We want a supportive college for our child.” It seems like such a straightforward request...but as is the case with so many college-related matters, it’s actually quite nuanced and complex.

What is a “supportive” college? Colleges offer a range of academic support for all students, which may include services such as peer tutoring, academic workshops, writing centers, and math centers. Some colleges offer additional services such as academic coaching or peer mentoring, available to any student upon request. Colleges also offer mental health support through campus counseling centers. And with professors’ office hours, residence hall staff, and academic advisors available at virtually every college campus, students may access multiple levels of support for any challenge that might arise, whether personal or academic.

Matters become more complicated when a student with learning differences has specific needs for support that exceed what most colleges provide. This could include more intensive academic or executive functioning support. For these students, the right-fit college may involve more individualized attention. As independent educational consultants (IECs), we want to be sure that the colleges we recommend offer the specific support our students need to be successful, academically and socially, in college.

Determining a Student’s Needs

When working with students with learning differences, it’s important to assess which accommodations and services the student will need to be set up for success in college. Some ways to accomplish this may include interviewing the parents, interviewing the student, reviewing neuropsychological testing reports and IEP/504 plans, and reviewing which accommodations and supports the student has been using in high school. It’s helpful to make a list of precisely what kinds of support the student needs—everything from accommodations such as extended time on tests or recording lectures, to services such as executive functioning support or social supports such as peer mentoring—so you can more effectively match the

student’s needs to what is offered by the colleges they are exploring.

Determining What Support is Available on the College Level

The next step is to determine if the support the student needs is available on the college level and on any given college campus. For example, many parents ask about a world language exemption in college—a common accommodation in high school. But this varies greatly among colleges. For colleges with a foreign language graduation requirement, some may approve a course substitution accommodation (with appropriate documentation), while others will not. Parents also sometimes ask about a modified curriculum or reduced course load. While a reduced course load may be available, colleges typically do not modify their curricula for any students.



Many LD/ND students will benefit from executive function (EF) support, especially during the transition from high school to college. It can be difficult to predict exactly how much EF support a student will need in college because parents (often unknowingly) tend to provide a lot of this support at home. Students who attend specialized high schools for LD students might also not realize the level of support they are already receiving at school and likely can’t predict how much support they will need in college. It helps to ask parents questions about how students get their homework done: do they need a lot of reminding? Do they often do their homework, but forget to turn it in? Do they use a calendar or another way of organizing their work and time? And a helpful question to ask: if you dropped your child off at college right now, what would that look like?

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Student Loan Payment and Forgiveness From the Perspective of a Former Federal Employee

By Jim Houser, MA, IECA Associate (FL), Member, Subcommittee on College Affordability (SOCA)

Informing students and families about federal student loans is challenging. In my early 20s, I remember reviewing a proposed regulation designed to reduce defaults on federal student loans. The regulation was around 700 pages and layered with requirements on colleges. One thing that colleges were not required to do is tell incoming students what their monthly payments would be on their student loans. Why is that? It's because no one knows!

Student loan interest rates are set each year in the spring before the next academic year. Students who borrow each year over four years will likely have four different interest rates. You can find the interest rates and origination fees at: studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/loans/subsidized-unsubsidized

Loan Forgiveness and Repayment

Students (and parents, if the parents are borrowing money on behalf of the student) do not necessarily have to repay federal loans in their entirety. There are different forms of forgiveness of federal student loans.

Sometimes loan forgiveness is based on an incident. If a federal student loan is in the name of just one person, the loan is forgiven upon the death of that person. Federal student loans can also be forgiven if a borrower is totally and permanently disabled. Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) is available to borrowers who work for public service employers and make 120 on-time loan payments.

Borrowers can join loan repayment programs, referred to as income-driven repayment programs,

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For students who are seeing a therapist, ask if they plan to continue to do so in college (and, if so, encourage parents to make these arrangements early to be sure the student has this support in place by the start of college). We make sure parents and students know that starting college is NOT a good time to pare down on support (academic or psychological). The transition to college is challenging to all students, and we recommend students "front load" support, as they can always cut back later, once they are comfortable at college and have adapted to the new environment.

Achieving a Balance between Academics and Social Fit

In addition to being guided by the level of learning support a student needs, we also need to keep in mind everything else a student wants in a college: location, size, majors, sports, extracurricular activities, spiritual life...the list can go on. And trying to fit "support" in can make the process of finding the right-fit college much more challenging.

While many IECs who regularly work with LD/ND students are familiar with learning support available at many colleges (including fee-based support programs), there is not a one-size-fits-all "list of supportive colleges." We sometimes find it can be helpful to reverse-engineer the process: instead of building a list of colleges that have a specific level of support, put together a list that has everything else a student is

looking for and THEN assess if the college offers the support your student needs. You might be surprised at the high level of support offered at colleges that don't offer a fee-based learning support program. Some colleges provide services such as academic coaching, EF support, professional tutoring, academic alerts systems (where professors reach out to academic support/disability services if they notice a student is struggling), and other kinds of support—but you may only learn about this by reaching out to colleges individually and speaking with staff in disability services offices.

Getting the Student Involved in the Process: Taking a Student-Centered Approach

Similar to the way a student researches colleges that have a club team for their sport, we include the academic support as part of the college list criteria. As the student moves closer to applying, we can together review their final college list to make sure they have a fully balanced list of colleges that meet their needs and where they can see themselves being successful. In many cases it will be easy to see that some of the favorites might require outside support (and fortunately, there are some excellent firms that offer virtual tutoring and academic coaching).

Having learning differences doesn't mean a student cannot succeed in college, that they need to forgo their accommodations, or that they should attend a college that is not the best overall fit. With the right support and resources in place, students can thrive both academically and personally.