



The Big Move

Preparing Your 2e Child for the Transition to College

This is the time of year when parents of twice-exceptional children are either starting the college search and application process with their children or planning to pack up and send off their children to college. In either case, these parents may be filled with a sense of trepidation, hoping that their offspring are up to the tasks that have likely caused parents much stress throughout grade school and high school — planning, organizing, focusing, prioritizing, problem solving, etc.

The transition to college and young adulthood takes many parents of 2e children by surprise. For years they have been so caught up in the here and now of getting their children through school that they didn't have the time or energy to contemplate the future. When dealing with the issues facing their twice-exceptional children in school, parents are often focused on "just getting through this semester" or "just getting through this year." College? That's too far off to worry about now.

2e Newsletter conducted e-mail interviews with two professionals who help twice-exceptional students and their families make the transition to college. One is Matt Wanzenberg, an educational consultant who helps twice-exceptional and other students with transitions throughout their educational careers. The other is Wendy Eisner, coordinator of a community college program designed specifically for twice-exceptional students. Both shared their thoughts on how parents can prepare their children for this phase of life and support them as they move toward independence.

A Conversation with Matt Wanzenberg, Ph.D.

Matt Wanzenberg, Ph.D., has worked in special education and school administration, and is now head of an educational consulting company in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, Wanzenberg and Associates, LLC. His company specializes in planning for transitions, which he describes as occurring from "grade level to grade level, building to building, or high school to the adult world." In his consulting practice, Wanzenberg has worked with twice-exceptional students and their families to build the skills the students will need to be successful in college, select an appropriate college, and learn to function independently in the college environment. Following is an edited interview with Matt Wanzenberg about his work with 2e students.



broad understanding of public and private resources to help in the fulfillment of a student's individualized goals.

Q: How do you help in the college-selection process?

A: We maintain a current and independent database of colleges, universities, agencies, and other training organizations that are evaluated based on criteria relevant to a client's individual needs. We engage the client and family in a comprehensive evaluation of interests, needs, and considerations that help bring options to light. Where needed, we update gaps in the student's record through psychometric evaluation, and/or vocational and career assessments that could help us make more confident recommendations.

Typically, our college-search clients participate in the development of a College Support Analysis, a multi-dimensional review that evaluates specific school or program characteristics within the context of the student's learning profile, which includes the student's known achievement data, applied compensatory skills, and strengths and challenges. We focus specifically on several school



Q: Can you describe the services you provide to students during high school and college?

A: We help in bridging the gap between high school and college or employment by training parents and students in the shifts associated with these transitions. We use a



Matt Wanzenberg, continued

or program characteristics:

- Design and infrastructure of support programs
- Review of available supports, including self-identification procedures – the means by which a student can disclose information about a disability to those who should be aware of it within the institution (It's important to understand that colleges do not actively seek this information, and high schools do not share it.)
- Other factors that might affect a student's academic performance while enrolled at the institution.

From this analysis, we make specific short-term and long-term academic recommendations. Short-term applies to high school enrollment and transition to college, and long-term applies to higher education and the workplace.

Q: How can parents and kids find colleges that will really be responsive to the needs of a 2e student? Many advertise their support services, but how can families evaluate these claims and choose one that fits their child's needs?

A: That's a good question which requires much more space than I probably have allotted, but I'll try my best!

Meeting general admissions criteria should not be the only consideration for the 2e student in his/her transition to college. Just because a student is admitted does not mean it will be a good match. And just because a school is the most rigorous or selective does not mean it's automatically the "top choice."

Two pieces of advice that I give are:

- Don't assume that all small private colleges are more responsive to students with disabilities based on their size.
- Don't assume that all large state universities have a broad palette of resources to offer students.

Visiting the school is critical, particularly during the ebb and flow of an actual college schedule, not a holiday. The details are revealed by observing and by asking the right questions: What's the culture of the campus like? How receptive to student diversity does the school seem?

Remember, all colleges and universities are mandated by law to maintain a basic student disability support program. Distinguishing between the schools that offer supports and services because it's the law and those that do so because it's best practice requires a great deal of dialog and reflection. You can't get this information from

a book or a guidance counselor's blurb. Give your student ample time to prepare questions and dive in... deep!

Inquire about the training that faculty and support staff undergo. Ask about partnerships within the school. A student disability support staff member who enlists the support and advice of experts on campus in the area of individual student need demonstrates the highest order of college support service. For example, at one school a professor of speech and language pathology with expertise in pragmatic social communication consulted on the needs of a college student with Asperger Syndrome.

Also ask to speak to enrolled students who access the support program. That can give you "boots on the ground" information on specific supports.

Q: How involved should parents be in the college application process, given that they may have kids with challenges in the areas of organization, time management, and written output?

A: I think it's good for parents to partner with their child during the admissions process, probably because I believe it's systemically stacked against many 2e kids. I support parents' involvement in the admissions process to the degree that it allows a student's preferences and concerns to be adequately addressed. Students should not be intensively directed in this process, but should be assisted by parents as needed so that they can make *informed* decisions. My 2e college clients appear to be ready to actually make those decisions for themselves.

But it's important to consider whether a 2e student is ready for college. The timing of college enrollment should be based relative to:

- The diminishing frequency and intensity of parent-based interventions
- The increased application of self-advocacy skills
- The extent to which current supports the student receives in high school will be available in college. (For example, if a student benefits from intensive organizational and time management support in high school on a daily basis, the family will need to look for a college that can provide that level of support or find private resources that can meet that need.)

It's been truly exciting to see options evolving for those students who are not yet ready to go away to college,





Matt Wanzenberg, continued

like gap year programs and bridge programs. And many students and parents are now opting to get their start at a community college, a choice with many advantages.

Among them are:

- Differentiation for diverse learners
- Less emphasis on the need for full-time enrollment
- The ability to live at home or in a supported arrangement
- Support for working while taking college classes.

Q: What can parents expect a college to do for their child in terms of accommodations and support?

A: Accommodations — how information is presented differently — are very common, while modifications — what information is added, subtracted, or enhanced — are rarely in effect on college campuses. Also, be prepared for a far less descriptive support document in college than in high school (i.e., no goals, no short-term objectives, no “minutes” or placement, etc.). Typically, the support document is drafted in concert with the student’s previous support plan, but it’s highly context-specific for each campus, based on what services the school provides for students.

Q: How much of a role should parents expect to play once their child is at college, especially if things aren’t going well?

A: Each case is so different, and I’m used to seeing a great deal of variability in parent’s anticipated participation at the college level. Some parents plan to be in contact on a weekly basis, and some plan on “cutting the apron strings” completely. In cases where parents and students are committed to continue their partnership in academic supports, I advise choosing a local college.

Parents who intend to fade often don’t know how to begin. When this is the case, I help them to “unlearn” many of the prime assumptions that K-12 IEP/504 advocacy has reinforced. But when it’s clear to me that a parent’s frequent involvement is required for a student’s success, we include that as a search characteristic in the College Support Analysis, looking for schools that value parent participation and have included it as a part of their support infrastructure. In all cases, though, there is the expectation that responsibility for academic support will eventually transfer from the parents to the student.

For parents, it’s critical to avoid what I call the “big surprise.” This means that, for months, parents can operate with the assumption that no news is good news. Their only source of data might be a casual “I’m fine” from the student on a weekly basis. I emphasize that it’s important to apply the tenet of “trust through verification” during the initial parts of each semester. When I work with college students, I tend to be specific about achievement. I often try to use error analysis on completed tests and papers as a way to problem solve, but also to verify that things are indeed “fine.”

Q: How do privacy laws affect the role parents can play?

A: The chief law which impacts educational records — in K-12 as well as in higher education — is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). More information about this law is available at www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html.

It seems odd to many parents that colleges will gladly take your tuition payments, but require formal steps to be taken by your student before releasing protected information. Typically, colleges are required to *acquire* — not *seek* — consent to share information with parents. However, this does not prevent some colleges from developing internal policies to permit parents to communicate directly with college support staff. Be sure to ask what requirements exist when you are investigating these college resources.

Q: How have you worked with 2e students transitioning to college?

A: It depends on what the student needs. I currently work with one high school student who I’ll call Jose. This 9th grader was diagnosed with AD/HD but also exhibits exceptional cognitive ability. He’s enrolled in accelerated and honors courses, and he meets the criteria for eligibility for an IEP/504 based on his executive skills deficits and processing speed. However, the family and I found that — with the proper balance of good communication, instruction in compensatory skills, follow-through, self-monitoring, and accountability — Jose could probably steer clear of the need for an IEP. Nevertheless, we are still considering the need for accommodations for college placement testing.





Matt Wanzenberg, continued

In putting together a plan for Jose, I borrowed what works from the IEP process, including:

- Multi-disciplinary teaming
- Goal setting
- Research-based interventions
- Parent accountability
- The need for a realistic plan for accommodations for third-party assessments like the SAT and ACT.

In addition, I included things I wish were a part of every child's IEP:

- Frequent reflection on evaluation data (The kind of data depends on the needs of my client. For example, I value the BRIEF, Behavior Rating Inventory for Executive Functioning, for most of my 2e kids in transition situations. But I use other evaluations and rating scale reports as well.)
- Use of this data for decision making
- Strong provisions for teaching meta-cognitive strategies (e.g., "learning how I learn")
- Anticipation and planning for the next transition
- A clear follow-up plan, including timelines that list the short- and long-term responsibilities for every team member.

For Jose, we want to work on building his survival skills far ahead of college enrollment. As we see how well he learns to apply these skills, we can then determine whether he'll need accommodations or more intensive, school-based interventions. I'm especially watching his processing speed, as this factor may indicate the need for extended time, which in college, requires extensive documentation.

I've never felt comfortable with framing Response to Intervention (RTI), 504, or IEP supports as negative consequences that students will be "punished" with if they fail to meet a standard. But they are often negatively perceived that way by students after a culmination of unsuccessful interventions. I try to avoid having this specific dialog with students; but the reality of stigmas, tracking, and poor self-concept require a realistic conversation with parents before, during, and after my involvement. In short, an informed decision for formal support comes with costs and benefits. I share that perception — supported by 15 years in special education instruction — as honestly as I'm able.

With Jose, I function as a coach. We work together to identify the barriers that get in the way of his being independent and successful in school. We often talk about what a "fly on the wall" would see when he reaches the goals we have set. We share an online calendar where we can track assignments and other responsibilities that affect his schooling. We also work together to track his academic and organizational goals and then chart them. I share these charts weekly with Jose and his parents, who also help with monitoring progress. In addition, I offer to proof Jose's papers and make mechanical and stylistic suggestions. I teach and reinforce learning strategies linked to the Kansas University Strategic Instruction Model, which can be explored at www.kucrl.org/sim/strategies.shtml. Most importantly, Jose and I have an honest dialog built on established rapport, with a reminder that I have a plan to fade away as he grows more independent and applies what I teach him.

I work with another 2e student in a different way. This student — I'll call him Dan — is currently in college out of state. Even though long-distance service is not my preferred approach, I provide support for this young man in the areas of organizational and self-advocacy skills. In situations like this, my relationship with the student begins here in the Chicago area and eventually extends to a distant college campus.

We take advantage of technology like videoconferencing, shared online calendars, screen sharing, and e-mail. We establish consent for release of information up front, and I make introductions to each of the advisors in the school's disability office. We use breaks and visits back home to gather our resources and map out challenges that we know will be ahead. For example, we identify curricula that may be more demanding, analyze gaps in the student's weekly schedule that could lead to difficulties, and reflect on the supports and the purposes of good self-advocacy.

Q: How do schools react to a third party getting involved with a student?

A: The current model doesn't exactly lend itself to third-party assistance in college. On the other hand, it doesn't necessarily discourage it either! It's important to realize that we are in the infancy of formal support for students with disabilities in higher education.





Matt Wanzenberg, concluded

As colleges stumble awkwardly towards a clearer model of universal supports at this level, it's important for me to take appropriate initiative. And, overall, I would say that I maintain good access to the information I need to help students like Dan in college settings. I work with a number of college students on campuses across Illinois and in Indiana. I'm pleased to see that, generally speaking, schools understand and appreciate the assistance of a third party in working with their students.

It depends to a large extent on establishing rapport with the support gatekeepers at a college or university. After proper consent for release of information has been established by the student, my contact begins far before a student steps foot on campus. In my initial introduction by phone or in person, I try to underline our common interests in the student's success. I explain the types of services I have provided in the past and how I will assist in the future during the client's enrollment. I share information, including our College Support Analysis, if applicable, and explicit information about academic strengths and challenges. I try to use specific examples so that college disabilities service coordinators can get a sense of where challenges or successful "teachable moments" have occurred.

Q: What changes do you see taking place in colleges and universities in terms of their understanding of who 2e students are and what they need?

A: More and more admissions offices are partnering with their colleagues in the student disability offices in order to add an important dimension to their admission criteria: self-advocacy and compensatory skills. This does not mean an IEP is guaranteed to get you into any particular

school; but it does mean that if you choose to share information on a disabling condition, schools may take that information into consideration in your favor. They cannot use the voluntary disclosure of a disability as a barrier to include an otherwise qualified candidate.

In part, this change in attitude represents good business because roughly 12 percent of the general population has a disability that may have an impact on education. Over the past five years, colleges have been actively exploring the need to bring this diverse population into the fold. As you can imagine, some colleges are ahead of the curve on this initiative, while others are behind.

Q: In ending, what words of advice do you give 2e kids about making the transition to college?

A: I have a laundry list of considerations I review with each student. The highlights include:

- Be aware that you are headed into an environment where you will have many, many ways to invest your time. Some of these will support your goals better than others.
- The more you know about what you do well, the easier it will be to find a major that will be meaningful to you.
- Be prepared to change your schedule. We often work on time management before students leave for college. I have a great activity that allows student, parent, and me to individually graph how time is spent in a typical college week. The goal is to share these perceptions — which often include misperceptions — and determine where time is best invested before a student hits campus.
- Make every mistake a learning experience. 

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