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Demystifying the College Experience for Students with Learning Differences

Cindy Lopez:

Welcome to Voices of Compassion, CHC's podcast series providing courage, connection and compassion, highlighting topics that matter to our community, our parents, families, educators and other professionals. My name is Cindy Lopez, and today we're talking about the transition from high school to college. This transition can be challenging, especially for those with learning differences. Balancing the demands of college with the need to now coordinate their lives, like physical health, mental health, socializing, managing money, managing time. All of that leaves students feeling unprepared, not knowing exactly where to turn to get the help that they need. For students to have a more positive college experience, they need to be able to understand their challenges and strengths, and to be able to advocate for themselves to be resilient and persistent and even take initiative. As a parent of a high schooler who is getting ready for college, you're probably wondering how you can best support your child now while they are in high school. Listen in to today's episode as we talk with Dr. Nicole Ofiesh, director of the Schwab Learning Center at CHC. She'll share keys that are essential to an effective transition for your child. Welcome, Dr. Ofiesh.

So, Dr. Ofiesh thanks so much for joining us today and I'm just wondering if there's anything that you'd like to share with our listeners as we get started.

Dr. Nicole Ofiesh:

I've been working with high school and college students for over 30 years. I am the parent of a college student with dyslexia and ADHD, and I also navigated the undergraduate and graduate and doctoral process with dyslexia myself. So I feel like the information that I'm providing to you today is that of a professional grounded in the research on learning disabilities, ADHD, high school and college. As well as that of the realities that a parent experiences and then my own struggles with school and identity around being a young adult and then adult with dyslexia.

Cindy Lopez:

I'm wondering if you could share some thoughts based on all those students that you've worked with. What would students say about what they wish they knew before they transition or made that transition to college?

Dr. Nicole Ofiesh:

I think students would say they wish they realized how much their parents do for them at home, what it's like to live without them, and that they really do have to go to get their own food and go to the store and do all of these kinds of independent living things in addition to making it to class on time and being motivated to do their homework and adjust to the realities of being a young, independent adult.

Cindy Lopez:

So Dr. Ofiesh what do you think makes a successful transition? We know that there are many transitions throughout our lives and so why are we highlighting this one? Why is this one such a big deal?

Dr. Nicole Ofiesh:

Well, I think the transition from high school to college looks different for a lot of different people. Some students will live at home and start at a community college or a technical college. Some people will live at home and go to a university and some people will travel across the country and not be able to come home, and some students are well-traveled, some people have never left their state. So depending on the circumstances, what's going to make that a successful transition is going to look different. So I think I'm going to start off with familiarity and friendliness. One of the biggest things that will help students feel comfortable transitioning is for their campus to become very friendly and familiar. So that means if possible to visit the campus a few times, walk around during school instead of in the summer when students are not necessarily around. Visit it, get to know it, get to know the area and make it become a friendly and familiar place. So you can dispel the anxiety, and scariness that comes with so many changes all at once. We know that from the research literature, that one of the biggest ways we can control anxiety and so many of our students with learning challenges have coexisting anxiety and some with depression, and we know one of the biggest ways to combat anxiety is to feel like you have a sense of control. And one of the biggest catalysts of anxiety is change. So what we want to do is help our children and students get a handle on the anxiety that comes around all this change in their lives. So again, one of the ways of doing that is making the campus friendly and familiar.

I think the second thing that is very, very important to make a successful transition is understanding the nature of one's learning challenges. In my experience many, many students know they have an IEP or a 504 plan. They know that they have this thing called a learning disability or a thing called dyslexia or ADHD or generalized anxiety disorder or whatever it may be, but they don't really know what that means in real life, and they really don't know how it plays out for them in school. So here's an example, some of the biggest issues associated with ADHD are planning what you're going to do

that means like what steps come first, second, and third, how I'm going to organize my materials and how I'm going to manage my time. If I know that I have a class that starts at 12:15 in the afternoon, I need to think about adding in time to get there. There's going to take a little bit of time to get my stuff together in addition to walking to class or catching the campus shuttle. So when students can demystify what the nature of their learning challenges are it helps them to really know specifically what do I need to be prepared for.

In the case of dyslexia, the amount of reading that's going to be presented to them in college is really gonna impact how long it takes to study because typically they still read slowly. So even when they've cracked the code fluency remains behind, and so they need to be prepared for how am I going to get through this volume of reading material and too often, what happens is they said, hmm, maybe I just won't read it well, when you're learning new material, technical vocabulary, you become specialists in a field, that's not going to work. You really have got to come up with some good reading comprehension strategies and reading strategies.

Another really important characteristic to keep in mind is really understanding why you use the accommodations you use and making sure that you have your documentation in order ahead of time going to the university website to the office of disability services or accessible education whatever they call it and looking up two big questions: what are the documentation requirements, is there anything I need to do to make my documentation compliant with what the university needs and are there any accommodations that I had in high school that just are not going to be possible in college. You know, there's two different sets of laws, there's IDEA, and then there's ADA and the 504. So the accommodations that happened in high school may not necessarily be supported or allowed under these different laws or at a particular campus. So those are three big things.

Cindy Lopez:

Just a note before we continue on with today's episode, we hope you're following us on social media, so you don't need to wait a whole week between episodes to get engaging, inspiring and educational content from CHC. Our social handles are linked on our podcast webpage at podcasts.chconline.org.

I think there are so many opportunities for things to fall between the cracks for students at college, especially as they're making that transition. Where do students typically fall between the cracks as they start college?

Dr. Nicole Ofiesh:

One of the things I see the most is that students want this opportunity in college to be a fresh start. And the beautiful thing about college is we don't get many opportunities in life to have a fresh start. You know if we made mistakes in high school, made some really bad decisions and they have kind of followed us because everyone knew about those decisions, college is a place where you get to reset and start all over and make better decisions. So that is the beautiful thing about starting college and making the transition to college, but one of the biggest places that students fall between the cracks is believing that they don't have to get the support they need for their learning challenges. That somehow they're not going to tell anyone, they don't want to use accommodations and they try and make it without the support that they had all along only to find maybe I really did need that extended time, or maybe I should have really learned how to do that text to speech program to make reading easier when I was in a high school, but I didn't want anyone to see me using it, or I didn't want to take the time to learn it. So I think that's one of the biggest places students fall through the crack early on is thinking that they can make it without the support. My recommendation is always, okay if you really insist on seeing if you can make it without the support, at least do your due diligence, have your documentation of learning challenges in order and know where that office is. So that if you get to the point where you realize hmmm probably not a good idea that I made this decision, you can get the support you need immediately.

The second place I see students fall through the cracks is around test taking. Oftentimes students get tests back and they simply look at what their score or grade was on the test and regardless if it was great or not so great, they just look at it. They go hmmm okay that was my grade, they either get bummed because it wasn't what they wanted or they're really happy because it was what they wanted or good enough, but one of the things that students need to be aware of is one of the most powerful techniques that you can use to stay strong and keep your GPA strong and your performance strong in class is to do what we call an error analysis, ERROR, error analysis of the questions you answered incorrectly. So go through your test, look at why did I get that wrong? Because sometimes you'll usually find you never took notes in that area, or you missed a whole section and you didn't read it, and if you're in a class where it's going to be repeated again, you want to go back and learn that because it might show up again, especially on a midterm or final exam, or you may realize that you were studying the wrong material. And so doing this error analysis on test taking, I have found is a game changer for the students that I work with. At first they don't know what you know I'm talking about, and then they do it and they realize, oh wow, now I know I need to be doing X, Y and Z, whatever it is to improve my test taking performance.

The other place I see students fall between the cracks is they wait too long before they get help. If you start to have difficulty or you start to get behind, you got to do something about it right away. Especially if you're on a quarter system because the quarters go by super fast. So my biggest advice is don't get behind, don't get behind, develop a homework schedule and stick to it. If that means setting your timer on your phone and reminders and using an electronic calendar to organize study time, not just when stuff is due, but really organizing your study time and sticking to it, that's really one of the best things that you can do. That's challenging, especially for students with ADHD because repetition is boring to them. So you know you might have something on your calendar, but your friend says, hey, you know, let's go down into town tonight and hang out with some friends. Well, of course that's going to sound like more fun than studying for an exam or reading something that you probably may not be interested in, but those are the hard and big decisions that students are faced with and it's usually when you start making too many of those decisions to abandon your work then you fall prey to getting behind and that's hard to come out of.

Cindy Lopez:

Yeah, those are all really good things and I even relate to them now in my own life. I mean error analysis, that's an important skill to have just throughout life to look back and to see where were the mistakes and how can I make that different next time and so those are really good skills for our students to learn that will be with them throughout their lives.

Dr. Nicole Ofiesh:

You know what Cindy, I'm really glad you said that because the kinds of things that we're talking about right now are indeed what you said. These are skills that students will need to cross the lifespan and they need these, you know, forever. So I love that you said that because everything that we're talking about actually goes back to your original question is like, what do you wish they knew before their transition to college is that all the skills that you need in college, you're really gonna need them once you go to work and you'll need them to manage you know a personal and family life too. So I think that was a really good point you brought up.

Cindy Lopez:

Yup completely. For high school students, what do you think they could be doing to be more prepared as they transition from high school to college?

Dr. Nicole Ofiesh:

Whether it's a Google calendar, it's you know, Microsoft calendar, whatever it is, get used to using an electronic calendar where you can put all of your due dates, study time

and personal time, like I'm going to go to the gym, I'm going to work out then, meet my professors, whatever it is at a certain time, your play time, get used to using an electronic calendar. And here's why: you may have six to eight classes and every class is going to have a lot of information and a whole different kind of schedule. Some may meet once a week for three hours, some might meet three times a week for 50 minutes and the more you can download all those details into one place, even though each class may have their own calendar hooked up to whatever course management system the university uses, it's really important to have a place where you can have personal and work time scheduled out in one place. It's very, very, important. And again, we're not just talking about due dates for assignments it's really helpful to understand how you use your time. The second thing that high school students can be doing now to prepare for their transition is looking at the university website under academics, go to the menu tab where it says academics and often you'll see academic support or academic resources. And every university has a writing center or a tutoring center or uh speaking center, you know, where you can learn how to do oral presentations better or a technology center. The point is be really, really clear about what resources are available to you in order to succeed at school and know that they're there. So if you start to get scared that you might be getting behind, or you're not understanding the material you know exactly what resources are available to you for free and where to go on campus. Again, too many students start to get behind or they realize they're not mastering the topic and then they wait a couple of weeks, more time has passed, now it's panic situation and then they start looking for places, but if you can know where those places are to go to get help before you even show up on campus it's so much better, so much better.

And I think the last thing is really making sure that you're aware of where you live and the social setting that you're going to be in. Be prepared for the challenges that might come up when you share a dorm. And think about how you're going to handle that. You know, think about how you're going to condense your life in this little room, living with people and plan ahead of time. When I need a break, what am I going to do? Am I going to go for a walk? Am I going out for a cup of coffee? And then identifying where those places are, especially if you're going back east where it's very cold, you know, are there quiet study places? Are there libraries all over campus? So where can I go to escape when the dorm life is just a little bit overwhelming. And again, for students with learning challenges, some like it really, really quiet, and they don't like all the commotion. Even students who love the commotion and the chaos and the social nature of being at college would benefit from taking some time out and finding a quiet place to study or escape. So really thinking through the social dynamics of living with a lot of people in a closed space, I think that would help people prepare for the transition.

Cindy Lopez:

So much of what you're saying just brings back my own college experience, getting nostalgic. So as we think about the transition from high school to college and thinking about parents now for a minute, what advice do you have for parents as they're working to help prepare their students for the transition to college?

Dr. Nicole Ofiesh:

I think it's important for parents to be aware that it's normal that your child's going to want to move away from you, and they're going to want a sense of autonomy. There may not answer your text messages as often as they used to. They will be probably working hard to show you that they are independent and can be making decisions for themselves. And probably they are not ready to be doing all of that, but that's kind of that normal process of growth, right. It's like the stake alongside the tree, you know, as the tree grows up, it still needs a stake, but the stakes got to move a little bit farther apart from the trunk of the tree so it can grow. So I think it's really important for parents to be able to watch their students struggle for awhile. Don't jump in to intervene all the time. Be there, make sure they know that you are there for them when they need you. Parents too should know what academic resources are so if the student calls you and says, oh, mom, or dad or grandma, I'm really struggling with..., you're able to say, oh, did you know that the campus has a math tutoring center? So you know, don't throw all of that stuff at your kids at once. They don't want to hear it, and they're already overwhelmed and scared, but if you have that information, just like I was telling the students to look at the resources on campus in your back pocket, you can very elegantly suggest it when the stuff comes up and you know, it's there, but it's a time to let go.

I think it's also a very, very important time for parents to let their children know that they love them, even when they make a mistake, because they will make mistakes and they will make poor decisions, but the more you can be compassionate and teach them, help them to process why something wasn't a good decision and be supportive and keep underscoring that, you know, I love you, I'm here for you, I understand this is all a learning experience. That's very important because you want your students to visit you during their breaks, right? You don't want them to be afraid to come home. So the parents they're going to go through this emotional dynamic too, and have some sleepless nights as well. My daughter is a junior in college and she just took her car back east for the first time, and I think I've lost as much sleep as I have when I was nine months pregnant with her because you know, of course I'm thinking, oh my gosh, she's all the way across the country and it's snowing and she's got a car and this gives her a lot more freedom to get off of campus and where might she be going and that's part of

growing up, right? It's part of growing up for the parent and it's part of growing up for this student. So those fears are normal, and I think the key is love and compassion

Cindy Lopez:

Yeah, I think the key is always love and compassion. Dr. Ofiesh as we wrap up today, just want to say thank you for joining us, but I also wonder if there's something that you really hope that our listeners hear from you today.

Dr. Nicole Ofiesh:

Going off to college and separating from your household really it's a rite of passage. It's one of the big, big hallmarks in a parent-child relationship. And I think we have to understand that with knowledge of the resources that are available on campus, understanding the difference between accommodations and documentation at high school and college and really understanding that students have to become independent learners now are our keys to being successful and being patient the whole way. And again, you know, letting them know how much you love them and that you're there for them. It's probably not the most empirically researched advice that I'm giving you, but it is real advice coming from 30 years of working with families who have struggled and kids who have struggled and understanding my own daughter and what kids and people need, especially during this very, very unusual time in society. So that's what I hope they hear, and thank you so much for inviting me to do this podcast.

Cindy Lopez:

We're so happy that you were able to join us today and just want to thank you for sharing your insights and expertise. Dr. Ofiesh is part of our Schwab Learning Center here at CHC and the Schwab Learning Center offers services for students in college as they make that transition and as they work to be successful in college. So you can find out more at chconline.org, and that's the Schwab Learning Center at CHC.

Dr. Nicole Ofiesh:

It's also good to add that we are starting to work with high school students too.

Cindy Lopez: Oh, great. So to our listeners thank you so much for joining us, and we hope that you'll listen in again next week.