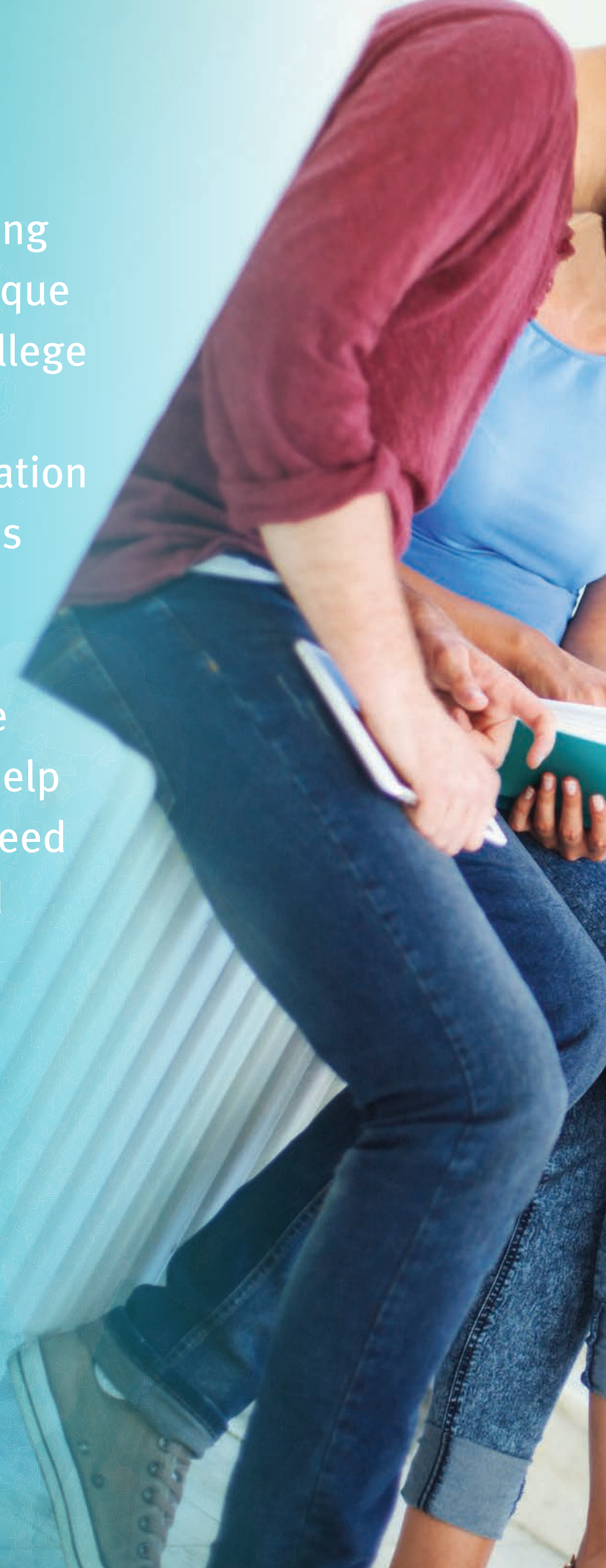
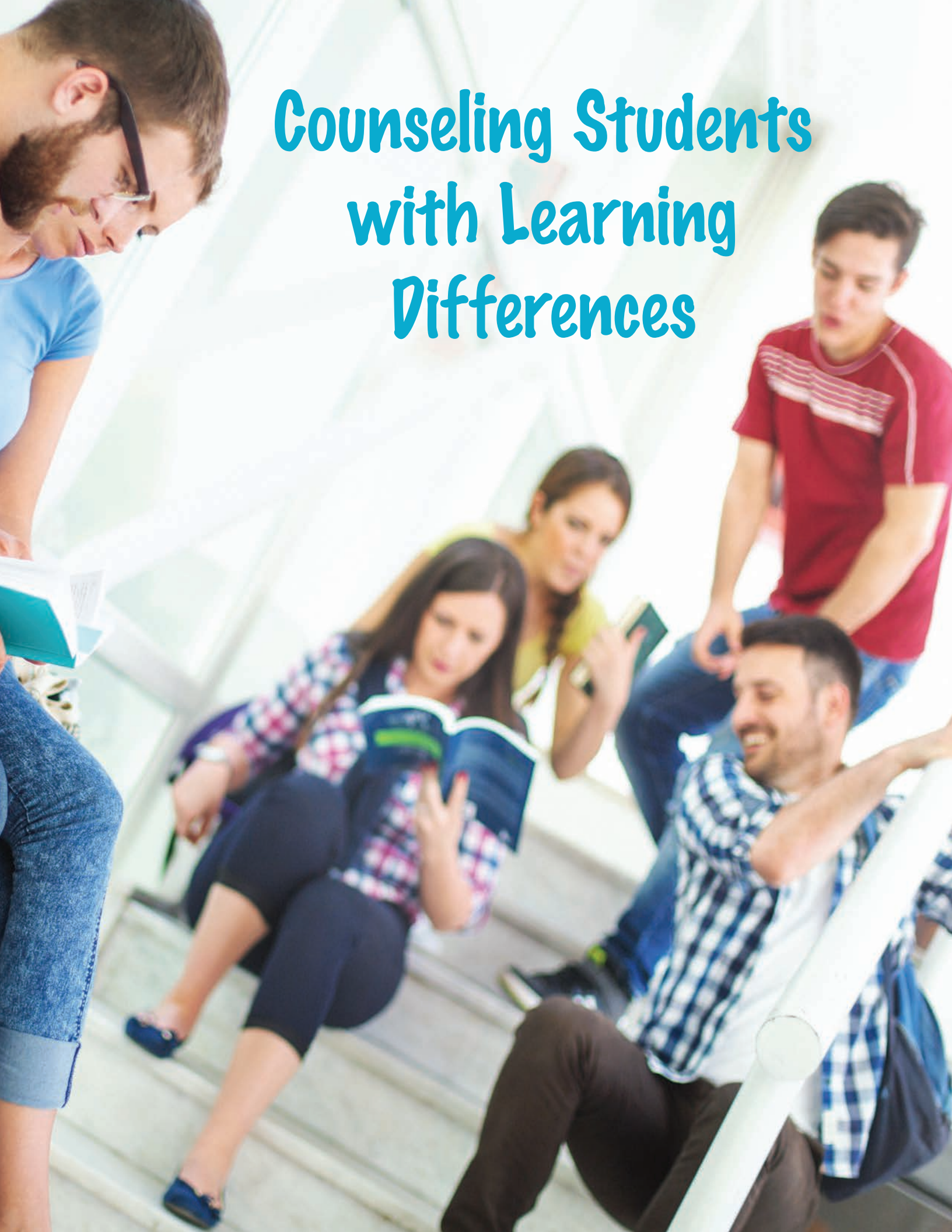



Students with learning differences have unique challenges in the college admission process. But with some education about these students and what elements they should look for with an ideal college fit, counselors can help these students succeed on their path toward higher education.

By Eric Endlich



Counseling Students with Learning Differences





Shepherding students through the college application process in a post-pandemic world is hard work—and when students have learning differences, the job can be even more daunting. According to the [National Center for Learning Disabilities](#), these students are three times more likely than students without disabilities to drop out of school and half as likely to enroll in a four-year college. When they do attend college, three out of four don't disclose their learning disability, so they are not eligible for accommodations that might help them succeed. But with proper guidance, students with learning differences can beat the odds and transition successfully to college.

ASSESSING STUDENTS' NEEDS

To understand what type of support and accommodations students will need in college, it's not enough to know their diagnosis. A student on the autism spectrum, for example, might need assistance with executive functioning (time management, organization, etc.), socializing, or living independently—or possibly none of the above. “Families and professionals often try to identify the ‘best’ school for students with dyslexia, for example, but that doesn't exist,” explains Elizabeth C. Hamblet, a college learning disabilities specialist and author of the forthcoming book, *Six Steps to College Success: A Pathway for Students with Disabilities*, 3rd edition. “Students should identify the colleges that are a good match on the typical points, then research the disability supports available.” Similarly, Diana Heldfond, founder of [Parallel Learning](#), says that it's critical “to understand the diagnosis in the context of the student. How is the diagnosis presenting in the individual student? So many students

share a diagnosis, but benefit from different levels of support.”

To determine individual support needs, review the existing special education plans (IEPs or 504s) and seek input from the students themselves, their parents, counselors, and other school staff. Keep in mind that students are not always receptive to utilizing support services in college, even if the professionals who know them best agree that they need them. Getting students comfortable with the idea of working with learning support professionals and programs in college may require an extended series of conversations.

It's also crucial to determine whether students are truly college-ready or whether they need more work on time management, self-advocacy, and independent living skills. Students who are doing well in challenging courses in high school (e.g., honors, accelerated, Advanced Placement, or dual enrollment) may be *college-capable*—that is, able to handle college-level academic rigor—but they may or may not be ready to live away from home. “Focus on college acceptance may overshadow considerations of college readiness,” Hamblet points out. “Counselors should encourage families and the professionals working with students to think about how much adult assistance students are receiving at school and at home. Are they ready to go to an environment where they'll have to make and keep their own appointments, communicate with professors, register themselves with the disability services office, etc.?”

CHOOSING A COLLEGE


In addition to all of the usual college selection factors such as academics, location, campus culture, cost, and size, students with learning differences also

need to consider the level of support offered. If they don't do this research until after they've put down a deposit on a school, they might discover that the college can't adequately meet their needs. Families should tour the disability services and academic success centers in addition to taking the standard campus tours. They will benefit from arriving prepared with a [list of questions](#) about required documentation, staff qualifications, available accommodations, and additional services. They need not worry that these conversations will adversely impact their chances of acceptance to the college, since admission and disability services are completely separate departments.

Lynn Abrahams, professor in the [Program for the Advancement of Learning \(PAL\)](#) at Curry College (MA), also suggests looking at mental health services, which students frequently need as well: “Are there mental health counselors with expertise in supporting neurodiverse students? How do students make appointments? Is there a waitlist for appointments?” In addition, it's helpful to find out how many sessions students are permitted, if the campus has other wellness programs (e.g., a living-learning community with a healthy lifestyle focus), and whether medication prescribers are available.

APPLYING TO COLLEGE

Completing the application materials can be a major obstacle for students with learning differences. As Hamblet explains, “applying to college requires a lot of executive functioning skills, including self-monitoring, prioritization, organization, and time management, which may be an area of weakness



for some students.” Likewise, Heldfond notes, “The application process itself (essays, deadlines, organization, time management, planning) demands a lot of students. This can be especially challenging for students who might be facing difficulties with the normal school load. More specifically, students with ADHD can have trouble managing the organizational piece and deadlines, whereas a student with dyslexia can find reading through the application materials challenging.”

One question that comes up regularly is whether students should disclose their diagnosis on their college applications. They are certainly under no obligation to do so. If a student has aspects of their transcript or application that might be confusing (e.g., a change in schools or academic performance), though, disclosure can be a way to help an admission committee make sense out of the situation. Moreover, some students choose to write about their diagnosis in their essays because they consider it an essential part of their identity. According to Heldfond, students sometimes “fall into the trap of viewing their neurodivergence as a weakness and something to hide.” She suggests that “instead of shying away from disclosing learning differences, students can use the essay to showcase their hard work and perseverance.”

Jacqui Byrne, founder of Flexschool, similarly notes: “Students are frequently uncertain about revealing their learning challenges in their application. While the decisions should be made individually and with a counselor or educational consultant, it is advantageous to talk about how a student approached and grew from a challenge. Facing a challenge before college gives

admissions officers a window into how the student will respond to adversity in college. Working hard and developing resilience are positives!”

TRANSITIONING TO COLLEGE

Getting accepted into college is just the beginning; there are a number of steps students can take to increase the odds of a successful transition. Hamblet recommends that counselors “advise students to register with the disability services office as soon as they enroll at the college they plan to attend. That way, their accommodations will be in place once classes start. They don’t have to use them if they find they don’t need them, but if they wait, the college won’t ‘wipe away’ any grade they earned before that or give them a chance to retake tests.” Hamblet adds: “Counselors should also suggest that students explore all of the supports available at their college, including subject-area tutoring, a writing center, academic coaching, counseling, etc. Accommodations are helpful, but they’re not the only key to success.”


Heldfond further recommends that “schools and counselors can work closely with families to ensure that all necessary paperwork and documentation that is needed to apply for services for the upcoming year is organized and ready.”

Colin Brady, director of student success and external recruitment at Mitchell College (CT), notes that students sometimes drop out of college “due to a lack of connection to the campus community, so keep that aspect of college at the forefront.” He recommends that students become engaged from the start via tours, open houses, and “specific events for accepted students.”

THRIVING IN COLLEGE

Once students start college, it’s up to them to obtain the accommodations and services they need. Byrne states: “The most important issue isn’t whether students have an LD; it is whether they can and will advocate for themselves. All colleges have support for students with academic and emotional challenges, but without a special program there isn’t a support system in place to make sure students are actively seeking help when they need it.”

Byrne also suggests that students “visit the campus prior to moving in to learn where the special services, peer tutoring, and emotional support departments are. Make appointments to meet during the first two weeks of the first semester; most students don’t recognize they need help early enough and then feel overwhelmed when they are not able to get immediate help. Having a plan and built-in support can help students feel more confident as they embark on their college years. It is possible to hire support from outside of the college, but that is also worth having (it) set up before school begins.”

While dedicated learning support programs may involve an additional fee, there are many other resources available to students, including peer tutoring, mental health counseling, career counseling, residence advisers, academic advising, living-learning communities, clubs, and faculty office hours. The more students develop a rich network of connection and support, the better prepared they’ll be for the inevitable challenges—and the more likely they’ll be to graduate on time and in good mental health. 

Eric Endlich, Ph.D., is a psychologist and founder of Top College Consultants (CA).