Preparing my son Dale for his transition to college proved to be vastly different from how I prepared my daughters. There was definitely no “blue print”. As a professional I felt as though I had all the necessary information needed for this life occurrence, but as a mother, I was not prepared for the emotion of what was happening not only for my son, but what was happening to me as his mother.

I know most parents feel as though we all go through this thing called, “separation anxiety” which I continually experience with all my three children when a growth transition occurs, but what I was feeling was a sense of “awe”. See I had just accepted that despite being told my son would probably never excel in school. I watched him walk down the aisle at 17 with his diploma with the knowledge that my child had received an acceptance from Saint Joseph University and other post-secondary institutions based solely on his abilities and character.

See, from the time my son was diagnosed and all through his school years up to this point, all we were ever told was what he could not do and what his limitations are, and despite Dale’s ability to move through, around and over these constraints throughout his life, I still found myself unable to let go.

I know the question is how did you? Well, I did not he did. The attitude of “possible” and self-advocacy skills that we as a family instilled in Dale early in life proved to be the most important factors in determining his success or failure in postsecondary education. He was prepared to work collaboratively with his support team which consisted of Saint Joseph University Center for Disability and Kinney Center, and his family. It enabled everyone to share one common goal to assure the success of his transition. Dale understood his diagnosis not in a limiting way, but in a way that would show him diversity in learning and acceptance of assistance when needed. He understood the functional limitations that result from his disabilities and understood his strengths and weaknesses. He was able to explain his disabilities to appropriate staff. This process came from encouraging Dale to participate in his IEP meetings and explaining his services and accommodations and what may need to be adjusted at an early age.

How do I know that it works? Dale advocated to leave Saint Joseph University with his disability coordinator and pursue his initial two years at Community College of Philadelphia with a Dual enrollment transfer back to Saint Joseph University when he realized that the summer program proved to be challenging. And for the first time in his educational career, I was the last to be notified of his decision because I had no FERPA rights at that time.

So today I am here to speak about steps to make this transition doable because even as a professional I was stumped. A publication that was given to me by a friend titled U.S. *Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Transition of Students with Disabilities to Postsecondary Education: A Guide for High School Educators, Washington, D.C., 2011* proved to be the guide in climbing this mountain. The answers to questions that come when completing these areas of post-secondary transition: The Admission Process, Post-Admission: Documentation of Disability and Post Admission Obtaining Services.

# Keys to Success: Attitude, Self-Advocacy and Preparation

## Accepts responsibility for their own success.

All students, including those with disabilities, must take primary responsibility for their success or failure in postsecondary education. Students with disabilities, in particular, are moving from a system where parents and school staff usually advocated on their behalf to a system where they will be expected to advocate for themselves. An institution’s staff will likely communicate directly with students when issues arise and are generally not required to interact with students’ parents. In general, students with disabilities should expect to complete all course requirements, such as assignments and examinations. Students with disabilities need to identify the essential academic and technical standards that they will be required to meet for admission and continued participation in an institution’s program. Students also need to identify any academic adjustments they may need as a result of their disabilities to meet those standards and how to request those adjustments. Students with disabilities need to understand that, while federal disability laws guarantee them an equal opportunity to participate these laws do not guarantee that students will achieve a particular outcome, for example, good grades.

## Takes an appropriate preparatory curriculum.

Because all students will be expected to meet an institution’s essential standards, students with disabilities need to take a high school curriculum that will prepare them to meet those standards. If students with disabilities plan to attend a rigorous postsecondary institution, they, like their peers without disabilities, need to make high school curriculum choices that support that goal. High school guidance counselors and state VR agency counselors, in particular, can play an important role in students’ curriculum planning.

## Good study skills and the ability to write well are critical factors of success in postsecondary education.

Dale takes developmental writing and reading courses. He participated in daily tutoring and study hours with his professors.

## Learn time management skills.

Although a primary role of high school educators is to provide monitoring, direction and guidance to students as they approach the end of their high school career, staff also need to prepare students to act independently and to manage their own time with little to no supervision. High school educators can assist students by identifying resources that will help them learn time management and scheduling skills. Dale has mastered organizing his classes around his work schedule and adjusting work schedule to meet class requirements.

## Acquire computer skills.

Because postsecondary students use computers to complete a multitude of tasks, from registering for classes to accessing course material and obtaining grades, it is essential that students learn to use computers if they are to be prepared for postsecondary education. Ideally, students with disabilities need to start using computers as early as possible in school to increase their familiarity with, and their comfort level in using, computers. Students with visual impairments, hearing impairments, learning disabilities or mobility impairments may have problems with inputting data or reading a computer monitor. Assistive technology can help certain students with disabilities use computers and access information.

## Consider supplemental postsecondary education preparatory programs.

A variety of institutions of postsecondary education have summer programs in which students can participate while they are still in high school, or after graduation, to ease their transition to postsecondary education. These programs often expose students to experiences that they are likely to encounter in postsecondary education, such as living in dorms, relating to other students and eating in dining halls. The programs may also focus on instruction in certain subject areas, such as math or English, or in certain skills, such as computer, writing or study skills, that can prepare a student to be successful in postsecondary education. High school educators can assist students with disabilities by identifying such program opportunities in their area of residence. Dale participated in The Kinney Center High School volunteer program for 2 years prior to applying and then when accepted he enrolled as a Summer Hawk. These alternatives enabled Dale to enhance more of his social and mentoring skills, but also assisted Dale in understanding the expectations that were required as a student at Saint Joseph’s University.

## Get involved on campus.

To help students avoid the isolation that can occur away from home during the first year of postsecondary education, high school educators should encourage students to live on campus and to become involved in campus activities. Attendance at orientation programs for freshmen is a good first step in discovering ways to get involved in the postsecondary education environment. Dale is still involved on Saint Joseph’s campus due to him developing sustaining and enriching relationships during his time there, but he also participates in the Center for Male Engagement and Black Student Union at Community College of Philadelphia. He is currently working on developing a support group for students with ID and Autism.

Dale from the very beginning was more than what I expected. He is all that I would have wanted in a child and he is becoming all that he needs to be for himself as a man on his own terms.