

## **Family Addresses Learning Needs Before Selecting the Right College**

In the fall of 2006, Steve S. and Marty M.'s son Dan began his last year of high school in Roseville. The couple was concerned because college applications were typically due in December and Dan hadn't expressed a clear interest or plan following graduation.

This was typical of their eldest child. He was very independent and not prone to long discussions about anything, much less his future. He did well on his ACTs and engaged in subjects that interested him like psychology and the physical sciences. But his struggles in other courses such as English or anything that required writing had pulled down his G.P.A. He also didn't like to ask for help.

Although they had no clear and consistent diagnosis of a learning disability, Steve and Marty knew that their son wasn't wired like everyone else.

"He's the kind of kid who isn't real communicative. It's hard to know what he's thinking and what he wants. He seemed ambivalent about college," Steve says.

When one of the high school counselors suggested College Connectors, Steve and Marty thought it was worth checking out. They met with Erin Sperling, a higher education consultant who helps students with disabilities move through the college application and selection process.

Erin believes that every student has different needs to ensure their success in college and that it's better to have those needs addressed up front than half-way through the school year when there is a problem, she says. Having a young son with autism drives her passion for helping families traverse the college search process.

"If a child has the potential to attend college, the opportunity should be explored. Letting go can be more acute for parents and you also need to balance independence with the need for assistance, especially if the child doesn't want to admit a learning disability. They don't want to be flagged or stand out."

Erin took Dan through some questionnaires and asked him about his interests, his lifestyle and study habits. When they looked at potential colleges that matched Dan's answers, Steve and Marty were surprised that they included smaller private colleges in Minnesota.

"We were concerned that we and he were limiting his options," says Steve, who works at the University of Minnesota. "The 'U' seemed like the easy answer. But with Erin helping to steer the process, it took a lot of the emotion out of it. She was very patient and kept everything moving forward even without a lot of positive feedback from Dan."

Then Erin guided Dan through the application process. She suggested that he combine thoughts from past school essays to complete his college essays. She even sat with him to complete online applications. Her objectivity and professionalism kept Dan on task and took some pressure off the family, Steve says.

“She didn’t do it all, but she broke the process down into steps for us so we knew what we needed to have done before we met again.”

After he was accepted at two schools, Dan chose Hamline University for its Psychology department and the comfortable feel of the campus — even though it offered less financial aid. He also decided that he wanted to live on campus.

“I really think Erin and the counseling helped him become aware that there would be advantages to living on campus. It’s a wonderful thing,” Steve says. “And yet we can still bring him extra clothes or help him out easily if he needs it.”

Looking back, Steve says that College Connectors was the best investment he and Marty ever made for one of their children. Their daughter has already requested the same investment.