

College Coaching: What It Is and How It Works

by Grace Barrett-Snyder

I was hesitant at first. I had recently taken a leave from a four-year college, and now I was supposed to work with a coach and examine all that went wrong? Don't remind me...

Well, that's sort of what happened. Working with a college coach didn't turn out the way I expected. It was better. I think everyone should have one! She wasn't a parent ("How many times do I have to tell you to clean your room?") or a tutor. Not a therapist, either ("But how do you feel about that?"). She was more of a friend. A guide. Someone I directed with goals I set for myself, and she helped me achieve them.

But to understand this, let me give you the bigger story.

I arrived at my first year of college as a strong academic student who happened to have Asperger Syndrome. From my success in high school classes, I assumed college coursework wouldn't be a problem. I was more concerned about the social aspects of living in a dorm and not knowing anyone. Would I make any friends? Could I adjust to the new freedoms and keep up with my daily responsibilities?

Turned out that I loved it there. I met a ton of new people and became close with the people I was living with in a short period of time. I could be myself and make friends that share similar interests. Make friends that are totally different. Friends that are from different states, countries. People who appreciated who I am. Whomever I liked spending time with or shared classes together. We were all in the same boat ("Where are you from? Isn't this so much better than high school?"). We were living more independently, taking classes at the same college, figuring out who we were, and ready for friendships beyond high school. This made it that much easier to connect with someone.

Coursework was a whole other story. I almost didn't see it coming, even when it had already hit me. Papers, lab reports, reading assignments, projects, exams. I couldn't manage my time well between assignments because I never knew how. In high school it wasn't that important. I could get things done in a short period of time. But not in college. There's planning involved, and clarification needed on certain assignments that you'll have to ask for. I had to actually study for tests in college, too. In particular, writing papers was draining and it took me a long time to finish them. Longer than it seemed everyone else had needed. I couldn't get all my ideas out. I'd get hung up over the wording of things, trying to make everything perfect, not knowing how great it would be if I could just see it through to the end and go back to edit and polish. These strategies I never learned. I guess I didn't know I'd need them. The structures of high school and college are very different, which later created these problems for me academically that I had no idea would occur.

I wound up home on leave and in a local program with plans to return the following year. That's where having a coach came

in. I worked with a woman named Ronni. I met with her once beforehand to introduce myself and give a brief background of what happened at school. She asked if there was anything I needed to or wanted to work on. This was a breath of fresh air. These goals that were created by working with her weren't what my parents wanted me to improve or what anyone else expected of me. These were things I believed I needed help with and things that would make going back to school so much easier. Fortunately for me, I had time to reflect on what happened my first semester and was very self-aware of my areas of difficulty (When did it start to go wrong? What was I most frustrated by?). This is rarely the case (as Ronni was surprised I was on top of things) so it is completely acceptable if you don't have this insight when you begin with a college coach. They're there to help you figure this out and let progress stem from you.

But if it helps, I'll share what my goals were.

Goal 1: Eat and sleep well, wake up at a reasonable hour, stay on top of personal hygiene.

- Make a check-list for meals – what I eat, what time I eat
- Record times I wake up, get out of bed, and quality of sleep
- Brushing teeth, shower, etc.
- Learn and practice stress reducing techniques to relax and fall asleep easier

Goal 2: Read more effectively.

- Read assigned material more than once
- Take notes while reading
- Write up a summary

Goal 3: Plan a weekly schedule so I feel productive.

- Exercise – keep weekly record of times per week, type of exercise, how long
- Reconnect with high school friends and stay in touch with Smith friends
- Work, make money, find clients

When working with a coach, it's important that you be honest. Did you complete all your work on time? Did you have any trouble? Don't be afraid! The coach won't punish or judge you. Again, they are there to help. Better yet, they are there to show you how to help yourself.

And I could not be more grateful.

Grace Barrett-Snyder has worked at AHA since first interning weekly during high school. She is now in college in Massachusetts and continues to participate with her writing skills and designing our Save the Date postcard for ROCK 'N' BOWL for Autism and the creative centerfold for this edition of *On The Spectrum*.

©2013 AHA Association. Further reproduction of this article is prohibited without express written permission of AHA.