



How to Succeed in College and University with Specific Learning Difficulties

By Amanda Kirby

Reviewed by DAMIEN FINNERAN, a student with dyslexia, who has a BA (Hons) in Politics and History from University of Stirling, Scotland and an MA in Youth and Community Work from N.U.I. Maynooth, Ireland.

The author of this book, Amanda Kirby is a well-known author in this field. She founded and has run the Dyscovery Centre, at the University of South Wales, since 1997, an interdisciplinary centre providing assessment and intervention for children and adults with a range of developmental disorders including dyspraxia (also known as DCD), ADHD, dyslexia, specific language impairment, autism spectrum disorders and behavioural issues. The purpose of the book is to give a quick and easy to use practical guide to students, parents/guardians and support services. The design and layout of this book is good and sets out a number of practical ways to approach the issues associated with surviving in Third Level education for students with specific learning difficulties. The book assists these students to deal with both academic and social issues.

This book is very user friendly as it is written in large script and simple language, on off-white paper and is addressed in a conversational tone to the student. It is also very much in touch with the student of the technologic age as there are many user friendly apps and websites with great links to other resources. I think this is the greatest advantage of the book for the students. It gives a realistic, needs led approach to prepare students with specific learning difficulties for Third Level education. It highlights that there are big environmental changes from Second Level to Third Level education. Kirby suggests before going to Third Level, students should check out basics like if the courses they choose suits their interests and looking at the options of staying at home or of moving out to private accommodation. The tone of this book is positive and helpful and is a must read for students with specific learning difficulties embarking on the daunting adventure of Third Level education. It is also a great resource for teachers or career guidance counsellors in Second Level education to prepare students for Third Level education. As it is easy to read, it helps students to settle with the book and persist with the practical advice.





The attention to detail for students with specific learning difficulties is clear and easy to follow throughout the book. It covers topics such as “*Getting and Staying Organised*”, “*Independent Living*”, “*Study Skills*”, “*Socialising and Feeling Good*” and “*Preparing for the Workplace*”. This book will be of good use to students as it offers a foundation in many aspects of life. Kirby deals with the issues in a comprehensive step-by-step way. The first chapter sets a great backdrop for the book as this book is all about empowerment for students first and foremost. The first chapter suggests to examine what specific learning difficulties one has and what will be the major issues faced by the student. This will help the student know what to expect when starting out on the quest of Third Level education. This can help families to work on weakness and celebrate the strengths in preparing appropriately for the new experience.

From involvement within the third level education system, with specific learning difficulties, it is clear that a large amount of resources are focused on academic success. Kirby takes a different, more balanced stand. She highlights that the personal, social development needs are important as there is huge social change in many area of one’s life. For example some of the social personal issues students are dealing with are low self-esteem, how you are perceived by other students, fear of failure, hiding your learning difficulties in social situations and many more. Kirby addresses these issues and empowers students to prepare for these situations which bring the social aspect of disability into the open.

What Amanda Kirby does is firstly gives students the social personal foundation and then also gives students practical study options and a number of life strategies. This empowers students to choose their goals to work on each day, choose their materials, resources, and encourages them to choose the path they take to reach their academic goals. An example of this can be seen in Chapter 5, “*Study Skills*” where Kirby gives advice on how to approach the actual exam, getting the most from lectures, tutorials and seminars, taking lecture notes, writing essays, using software and the internet, communication with tutors and lecturers. All of these factors can be crucial to students with specific learning difficulties succeeding in Third Level education.

Chapter 3 is very interesting and is one of the key chapters in the book. Being organised will help students to reach their goals in life and become a successful person in college. Without organisation skills life may be chaotic and some days may be full of stress. Kirby suggests that making life easier is important, by taking some time to get organised. It is suggested that students should take the time to establish routines and model expectations and offers opportunities for students to





make choices. She advocates being organised in a college setting as vital to ensure that you get your work done on time. Having a different folder for every class is a great idea because it helps you to keep all your work for one subject in one spot. For example if you have seven classes you would have one folder for every class. Then when you go to study you can just take out the appropriate folder for that class and not have to worry about your other classes. This is a perfect example of how being organised will help you to succeed in a college environment. Being organised for college is an extremely important habit as it lays the foundation for being organised in the workplace. It is just as important if not more important. Amanda Kirby makes this link and relates this text to lifelong learning.

The publication of this book is timely as there are more young people entering Third Level education as there is a lack of jobs in the economy and a far greater reliance on education in our ever-changing society. As an individual with a specific learning difficulty I would have no hesitation in recommending this book. I would have found it a most useful resource tool when I embarked on the road of, and navigated the Third Level educational system.

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