



Navigating College with Leukemia: An Interview with Bassam Sidiki



People often forget that students with health conditions may require accommodations in college. These students are often left out of the transition planning process. This month, I asked Bassam Sidiki a number of questions about his journey as a college student with cancer. Bassam is a recent graduate of Georgetown University and a currently a doctoral student at the University of Michigan. Feel free to share suggestions of other questions you would like me to ask future interviewees. We can learn so much from the experiences of students who have gone through it. Below, Bassam shares his perspective.

I am currently a doctoral student in English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan, where my focus of study has been very much influenced by my own experiences with illness and disability. I was diagnosed with T-Cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL) on February 26th, 2011 in Kalamazoo, Michigan. I had recently immigrated to the United States from Pakistan and was completing my senior year in high school. Today, I have been off therapy for almost 4 years, having to go for routine checkups and blood labs every 6 months.

1. Think back to when you were considering college. What were your concerns?

By the time of my diagnosis I had already applied to colleges, and the decision had to be made between two schools of my choice: Georgetown University and Oberlin College. Interestingly, at that time disability accommodations beyond finding a good oncologist didn't register in my choice, because I was under the impression that I would be back to at least 95% normal after the gap year I was going to take. I selected Georgetown because of the substantial financial aid, its stellar English program, its emphasis on inter-religious activism, and the fact that I wanted to study in a big city. In addition, I believed that the Lombardi Cancer Center's convenient location on campus would allow me to easily get my treatments. I visited during accepted students weekend and met with my prospective oncologist, Dr. Aziza Shad, who was also the director of the Hematology/Oncology Clinic at the time, and her support throughout my years at Georgetown was instrumental to my academic success.

2. What specific issues related to your disability/needs did you have to navigate once you got to college?

Because I was still on chemotherapy, my immunity was quite low and I needed to have my own room and bathroom – and the residential facilities at Georgetown were very accommodating in that regard. However, things took an unexpected turn when I arrived for my freshman year. Dr. Shad diagnosed me with bilateral avascular necrosis (AVN) in the knees which rendered me unable to walk longer distances, and I had to get around using a motorized wheelchair. I also underwent severe episodes of depression and anxiety, and I needed my brother to live with me my first year, which the school was also happy to allow. These bumps in the road also necessitated that I drop two of my classes in the first semester and be a part-time student – a situation that may otherwise lead to losing one’s financial aid. However, the Dean’s office and the office of Student Financial Services were understanding in this regard as well. After undergoing numerous surgeries to address side-effects such as AVN, I was able to walk again and live by myself sophomore through senior year.

3. Were there key people/places on campus that you were able to connect with to get support? If yes, who/where?

The most helpful places for me at Georgetown were the Academic Resource Center (Disability Support Services) which coordinated with me to have my professors sign accommodation slips and regularly checked in on how I was doing; the Lombardi Cancer Center; and the Dean’s Office where my advisor, Dean Joseph Napolitano, was a great resource.

5. What suggestions would you have for someone with a disability who is applying to college?

I realize that people’s experiences with disability or illness are unique. I would urge a prospective college student with a mental or physical disability to thoroughly research whether their school of choice has places like an Academic Resource Center (Disability Support Services), Counseling and Psychological Services, and a caring dean’s/advisor’s office. Moreover, my family’s presence in the DC area was also an important part of my support system, and I would suggest that prospective college students with disabilities apply to places close to home. I was lucky in the sense that my family agreed to move to the DC area with me, and that may not be true for everyone.

