



## **The College Spy® Podcast with Michelle McAnaney**

Episode 13

#13: Tips and Tools for your LD student: An Interview with our Academic Coach Lisa Delfino

Welcome to The College Spy podcast, a podcast for parents and students addressing all aspects of the college selection and admissions process. I'm Michelle McAnaney, the founder of The College Spy. We offer college planning services to students and families across the United States and internationally. We are a team of dedicated educators who are committed to helping students and families identify the right colleges to apply to and get accepted. We offer our guidance and expertise in a way that improves student performance, increases confidence and promotes college readiness and maturity. The College Spy works with all students including students interested in the STEM fields, students with learning differences, international students, and third culture kids. To learn more about The College Spy, visit our website at [TheCollegeSpy.com](https://TheCollegeSpy.com) and follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).

Welcome to this week's episode of The College Spy podcast. In this episode I interview Lisa Delfino, The College Spy's academic coach for neurodivergent students. Lisa works with students in grades 10, 11, and 12 who have been diagnosed with ADHD, autism, or a learning disability. She is a master at helping students identify their strengths, utilize study skills, get organized, improve their grades, and generally feel better about themselves as people and as learners. I am so happy to have her on The College Spy team.

Here's her official bio. Lisa Delfino has been helping students figure out their strengths for over 35 years. She believes that every student can find their path when they know themselves. Lisa's specialty is helping high school students with learning differences create a roadmap for success. Lisa builds confidence in students by helping them find learning strategies that work using their own strengths. She also connects with parents to help them develop routines with their students for studying at home. Lisa is compassionate yet honest. By using this approach, students who have been marginalized in school get good grades, realize they have a future, and use tools to prepare for that future. Lisa is a nationally board certified exceptional needs specialist and holds a BAE from Arizona State University. She is certified to teach students with mild and moderate learning differences.

### **Michelle McAnaney:**

Welcome to The College Spy Podcast, Lisa Delfino. I'm so glad to have you here.

### **Lisa Delfino:**

Oh, nice to see you again, Michelle. How are you doing?



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**Michelle McAnaney:**

I'm good. It's good to see you too. Let's let listeners know how we know each other and how we met.

**Lisa Delfino:**

Oh, yeah, I was just thinking about that the other day. Do you remember? We were in an orientation for our first year working at that high school.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

It was interesting to be in an orientation as a new staff person, being that we were both experienced educators.

**Lisa Delfino:**

Yeah, that was interesting. It was also kind of a little bit of a shell shock because the difference in culture from where I'd come from versus being in Maine.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

You were in California.

**Lisa Delfino:**

Yeah. Before that, I taught there for a lot of years too. Yeah. Interesting. So I love this thing you're doing with The College Spy and I really appreciate you allowing me to work with you again.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

I am so happy to have you on my team and the students that work with you are so lucky. Today, we're going to talk about how to help your neurodivergent students stay motivated as the year goes on, because we are both noticing that students struggle in quarter three to maintain really good habits.

**Lisa Delfino:**

Well, because I still work in a high school, I'm working with students right now who are having a hard time keeping up with work and they're starting to lose motivation. So those are typical signs. It's the end of winter, beginning of spring. And I don't know about other people in the country, but around here in the Northeast, it's very drab, you know, the snow is gone and it really affects students. I mean the lack of light. All through the winter affects students and then you get to a point where you're just tired. And so that's what's happening. And I have parents all the time who contact me about "what can they do to make things, you know, how can I help my student regain their motivation?" So that's a common question.



**Michelle McAnaney:**

How do you answer that question?

**Lisa Delfino:**

We start with the basics. There's less anxiety when you're organized. So the first thing I'm going to start with is their backpack. Because if they have been one of those students that they've spent their entire year avoiding organizing their backpack, it catches up with them around now because it's full of stuff and they don't know where anything is. And that's a really hard situation to be in when you're looking for a specific assignment you did or you're looking for a pencil even I find that a lot of parents can help their students if they just say to them, "hey, let's clean out your backpack together this weekend and organize it", and putting papers in piles or all the math in one place and the English and another etc. It's a good way to start and then you can get rid of the stuff you did the first semester and focus on the stuff that you're doing now.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

Do you think kids feel resistance with that or relief?

**Lisa Delfino:**

Initially they always act like it's the end of the world. "You're making me do this?" But I think with a parent that's going to be a hard one, because they really resent you getting into their space and their backpack's part of their personal space. So you got to be careful. You can always ask somebody at school to help you. Maybe a study hall teacher or somebody or even if they have a resource room, special education person, you could ask that person to help you with it.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

Yeah, sometimes it's a matter of just saying what it is that you need and not waiting for a staff member to notice this is what you need.

So what else is going on that's a problem? So we've got disorganization and a messy backpack.

**Lisa Delfino:**

Another big one is that students are always telling me they don't have enough time for anything. And a lot of that is because they look at their grades. And maybe they're all lower than they want them to be and so their first thought is "I can never do this". Just like they feel defeated. And so a really simple thing that I had them do is to make a checklist of what it is they need to actually finish to bring their grades up. What we do is just go through their assignments for each class and then actually write down everything. I had a student last night that I was working with who the first thing he said to me was "I just feel so overwhelmed right now". And I asked him why and then he started talking about how his "grades aren't good, I have so much



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to do", and he's going on and on about this and I could tell it was really upsetting him. And then I asked him to go through each class with me, and we did and made a checklist. And it turned out it wasn't as much as he thought it was, and once he looked at the checklist he said "oh I can get this done in a couple days". It relaxed him, and it also gave him the power to get started. Which is the first thing that goes away when you feel overwhelmed. You start to think "I can never do it". That's why we procrastinate. We're avoiding that yucky feeling that reinforces the whole idea of "I'm never going to get this done."

**Michelle McAnaney:**

Just making the checklist is going to get them to be able to.

**Lisa Delfino:**

Yeah. Because they can see it, they look at it. It's a tangible list that they can see and go. "Oh, wait, that's not as much as I thought". So checklists, Yeah. Like I have one student who uses a whiteboard actually in her bedroom to make her checklists. She's got it divided by subject. I have another kid who loves the multi colored sticky notes and he's got orange and green in his backpack and he makes his checklists a different color based on his mood. For him, it makes him happy to open up wherever he's got them and he sees that bright green sticky note and he goes, "oh, that's not a bad checklist." Other kids use apps on their phone, like Reminders on an Apple phone or Google has this app that's called Tasks. And it's really easy to add, like a student could make a folder for each class or they could just make a list for that night. And both of those, Reminders and Tasks will give you notifications so that it pops up on their phone "don't forget to look at your list tonight". And then they just feel so much better about things because it's under control.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

One of the things I hear from families often is what is the tool that my student can use in order to become more organized and manage their time better?

Do you have an opinion whether a digital tool is better than the hands on tools like the sticky notes and the checklists?

**Lisa Delfino:**

So, digital versus paper. That's the great question. I find that a lot of parents who used paper try to push that on their kids. And over the years, I've discovered that each student is different. There are some people who want to put a piece of paper, whether it's a three by five card or a sticky note, they want to put a piece of paper in their pocket. Other kids want a little notebook. We look for those little three by five notebooks. I'm sure you've seen them. Those are great. And again, it's in their pocket or it's in their backpack in a place they can find it easily. Other students want it to be a reminder on their phone because they're on their phone. And so they know they'll look at it. Every student's different and it takes lots and lots of practice for them to



really start to use something consistently. And that's where coaching is super helpful because I see them every week. I can help them remember, and then they feel accountable to a person, so then they're more likely to start using it.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

And it's a person that's not their parent.

**Lisa Delfino:**

Yes, that's very true. Because we all know that whole fight that you get into the headlock. Where you're arguing with your parent about, "no, I'm not going to do this" but they don't say that to me. I have a way.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

I think it's developmentally normal for students to want to pull away from their parents and be more independent. And when they're working with a coach, tutor, teacher, there is a sense of independence. Like I'm asking for help. Who is an expert in this? So tell us about academic coaching because a lot of the tools that you've been describing sound like tools of executive function coaching and at The College Spy, we're not offering straight up executive function coaching. Our service is, well, I think it's bigger and better. We call it academic coaching, which includes EF coaching.

**Lisa Delfino:**

When you think about it, it's a personalized approach to assisting students. You can really think of it as three areas. Learning, so I teach students how to understand and remember, which would involve specific learning strategies for them. I teach them how to get things done, like time management, organization, that's executive functioning stuff. And then I help them deal with anxiety, like feelings of overwhelm and stress that are related to learning or executive skills. I'm not a therapist, but I do know that when students are taught how to learn or how to use tools to keep them organized, that their anxiety does decrease.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

And you're meeting with students pretty much weekly.

**Lisa Delfino:**

There's some students that after about six sessions or so, they like to spread it out a little bit. Like maybe to address certain times of the year when they have specific tasks. Like at the end of a quarter, or final exams, or midterms, or to address that kind of thing. So we're very flexible. I've learned a lot over the years of teaching about when students are able to work and when they're not. Because sometimes we asked so much of them, especially high school students. They're tired, there are certain times when they're tired and we just can't push more learning



on a student that's tired. I really use the calendar so that I get them when their energy is at a peak, their motivation is at a peak. And therefore they're able to learn.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

Thinking of some of the neurodivergent students on my caseload and how many things that they have to do. And they have this tutor, and that coach. How do you get the buy in for academic coaching?

**Lisa Delfino:** It's really interesting. The initial consultation meeting is free to anyone who inquires, and they just reach out to you, you talk to them, and then you'll send an introduction email to myself and the parents. And then I set up a meeting with the parents and their student. And what we've discovered is that when a student is presented with the idea that you have something you need, tell me about what it is and as soon as they start to talk about what it is they need, I can help them create a goal for themselves. And by creating that goal, they become incredibly motivated to reach it. Because it's their goal, it belongs to them. I didn't create it. Their parents didn't create it. They did. And so in the initial consultation, I help students create a goal and then come up with one strategy that they could use the very next day at school. So, everybody who inquires gets that benefit of talking to an expert. And I've discovered that students are incredibly motivated and they tell their parents "no, that's what we need to do. I don't need a tutor. I need to learn how to study better. I need to be more effective. I already know how to do math. I just don't know how to study for a test." That's how we get the buy in. And if a student doesn't want to do it, there's no way that we should push them because it has to be their motivation that pushes them.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

It's difficult for parents when they're identifying a problem that their student is having, and they're trying to find a person, a tool that will help their student, but the child isn't ready. And the parent is thinking "but college is coming up soon and you're so smart and you should be able to do this, but you're missing some skills". But if the student isn't ready, it's a difficult spot to be in for families.

**Lisa Delfino:**

But it's something you can't ignore because they're not always not going to be ready. And that's the thing that I think that we have to remind parents is that everybody grows up. Give them a chance. It's okay if they're behind the other kids in your family or the other kids in your neighborhood. They'll grow up, they'll be ready soon, just give them time.



**Michelle McAnaney:**

And the other thing I want to let people know is academic coaching for The College Spy starts usually the second semester of 10th Talk about that a little bit and how come you think coaching might not be appropriate for students in grade nine?

**Lisa Delfino:**

Some students are mature enough, but cognitively, they're usually not ready to think about metacognition. They just started high school, so they're getting used to the rigor of high school, and the level of demand on their time, and what they have to do. And so they have to experience that a bit before they can really understand that there are ways to do things better. Initially, they think they know everything. You know, 14 year olds, 9th graders, they can be mature, but they still think they know everything. But then something happens, developmentally, between 9th and 10th grade. And sometimes it's right around the middle of 10th grade where they begin to really realize "I need to do this more efficiently because it's getting harder". Because it really starts to get hard quarter three of 10th grade is hard. And any kid will tell you if you ask them. And then it just increases, the rigor continues to increase. So they know that their level of efficiency has to increase, and that's a good time to get them started with coaching.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

Lisa, I want to let listeners know how we developed academic coaching and the need that we saw that made us come together and create this package in this program. In my mind, what I remember is that the difficulty we identified was students were having trouble with self advocacy. And I was thinking, as I was helping students "Plan for college, choose the right colleges, apply to colleges" that my neurodivergent students, when they got there, were going to have a really difficult time taking over the tasks that their parents were doing for them during high school. And you and I had a conversation around what we could do with coaching in order to teach the students these self advocacy skills. And then I think what happened was as you met the students and were working on self advocacy skills, you saw more and more needs and then coaching got bigger and it got better. Can you talk about that a little?

**Lisa Delfino:**

Sure. Yeah, it's that whole idea that when a student gets to college with any kind of learning disability or learning difference, they need to disclose it. They need to talk about it. And it actually, around the same time where you were just seeing this, I was also seeing students who had IEPs who wanted to go to college, were very clearly motivated to go to college. And I needed to figure out how I could help them get in. So I started to research that and read a couple of really good books and listen to blogs and followed all kinds of people. And realized that if a student gets to college, and can't name their disability, "this is what my disability is" and then name the accommodation they need and explain why they need it. If they can't do



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that, then they don't get the help they need. So I had also had a student who before I had this awakening, she went to college and ended up dropping out because she didn't get help for a disability and I felt terrible about that. So those are the things that led me to thinking. And then I was listening to you talk about it, and it kind of came up, this idea bloomed that took us to create this student centered and kind of improvement oriented package of coaching. And I think about what I do with students every day "what assignments do you have? What do you need to do?" You know, that kind of thing. I'm coaching them to get everything done, but then I love to take those moments where we talk about a way for them to get things done that makes it easier. So all these years, I've studied learning in the brain and looked at how students learn, how they remember, how they're able to retrieve, and so I have a really solid foundation in the science behind the learning strategies that I teach students to use. So I understand the whole idea of how students encode, how they learn information, how they retrieve it, how to use it. And it's great to be able to teach that to someone on an individual level and to see them apply it in their life and find success. That's the part that's been, I think, probably the most fun with this whole project of ours, is seeing the student success.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

You're taking the student's current course content, what they need to be doing, and you're using it to teach the students learning strategies, study skills, organization, and time management. So they're getting things done, they're getting their work done, their grades will go up as a result, but they're also learning the skills that they need in order to be successful as they move forward towards college

**Lisa Delfino:**

Correct. So like a big part of what we do is we work on self advocacy. Because nine times out of ten with every student, especially 10th graders, it's always going to come up "Oh, I need to talk to my English teacher because I'm not sure why she graded this one assignment or this test or this essay like she did". And then we practice, "okay, I'll be your English teacher", let's role play, what are you gonna say to me?" And so self advocacy, being able to find the right time to talk to teachers, and also the right way so that they listen to you, it's really important. Because we know that meeting professors during their office hours really helps college students. So I'm trying to teach our high school students to meet with their teachers when they need help as soon as they can to practice that.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

Another piece of this that we must bring up is that in order for the student to be able to practice the self advocacy skills, and their study skills, and organizational skills, the parent has to pull back.





**Lisa Delfino:**

Yes, that's a tough one, isn't it?

**Michelle McAnaney:**

How do you help parents do that? You're so kind. You can tell a parent to back off in a way that makes them feel like they're being helpful. And so, talk a little bit about how you do that, and what you see that they're doing different to help their child.

**Lisa Delfino:**

Well, you know, I think doing this for as long as I have and also being a parent and having lived the process, I know a lot of times that something will happen at school and a parent will send an email. They're growling, they're upset about something, or they're not sure why something is happening. They don't consult their student, they just do it. I had a student that I worked with a few years ago who told his mom, actually, I was with him on a zoom call and he turned to his mom and said "I need you to stop doing this because you have messed up my practice in learning how to be a good self advocate." And she stood up really straight and went "oh" and then left the room. And I looked at him and I said "are you okay?" And he said "yeah, that was good, I needed to do that". At IEP meetings, in my current practice, oftentimes when a student hits around junior year, they say to their parent, "okay, I'm going to handle communication with my teachers now. You can step in if I don't do it correctly, or if my grades drop below an 80" or something like that. But they set a boundary. So I'm teaching students to set a boundary with their parents so that when their parents hear from the college "I'm sorry, I can't tell you anything because your student is an adult and has not given us permission", they don't freak out.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

Yeah. So at the beginning of our podcast, we were talking about how this is the time of year in the spring, kind of in the end of third quarter where, kids can tank a little bit. We're also saying parents need to pull back and let their child take care of a lot of the things that parents had to take care of when the child was younger.

**Lisa Delfino:**

Right.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

And to me, it's about redefining success. So, is success at this time "your child gets an A or a B", or are you defining success as "my student actually communicated with their teachers and took care of pieces that I normally take care of, they did it, they're practicing it, now we're reaching success", because that's the skill they're going to need when they get to the next level to college. Just kind of how I talk to families about it, about pulling back and saying "it's okay if the



grade slips a little, because what the success is, is that the student's working on it". How do you chat to parents about this?

**Lisa Delfino:**

That's a good way to look at it. Another way is missing assignments. That's a big indicator of "are you keeping on top of what's going on in classes? Are you following up on the things you're supposed to do?" So a lot of times when students come into coaching they have like a whole raft of missing assignments in their classes. So we'll set that as our baseline. "You have five missing assignments in english, and four in math" and whatever it is and then we work to get it down to zero by like within a couple weeks. And I have yet to be unsuccessful with that with students, but they do it themselves by actually thinking about it and in a different way. Instead of putting the pressure on them to get an A in a class, let's say just putting the pressure on them to finish everything. And then turn it in on time. But that's after the missing assignments are gone. They're gone, our next goal is "okay, so now for the next couple weeks, try to turn everything in on time" and we do it in short chunks so that it's not overwhelming

**Michelle McAnaney:**

Yeah, I love that. I'm so happy that you're on The College Spy team. I'm just delighted by it and the feedback that I'm getting from parents who have worked with you is that things are better and a few people are feeling more confident headed into college and grades are going up. So it's great. Thank you.

**Lisa Delfino:**

Oh, you're welcome. I really enjoy it.

**Michelle McAnaney:**

Lisa, thanks for coming on The College Spy Podcast.

**Lisa Delfino:**

Oh, you're welcome. I really appreciate you asking such informative questions and I hope that I get to see some of your listeners.

If you're feeling stressed and overwhelmed by the college admissions process, this is for you. Our next session of College Admissions 101 is starting soon. This four week course is the perfect opportunity for you to gain the knowledge and confidence that you need to help your student through the college selection and admissions process. College Admissions 101 is a live and interactive course on zoom for parents of students in grades 9, 10 and 11. Over the four weekly sessions we cover the key topics that you need to know to successfully navigate the college admissions process. At The College Spy we live and breathe college all day long and share expert insights into the frequent changes to this process. It's not the same process we went



through back in the late eighties and nineties. So save yourself hours of research and costly mistakes that could affect your student's admissions prospects with this course. You'll be working directly with me, Michelle McAnaney the founder of The College Spy. As we discuss key topics, including:

- How to build a college list that best fits your child and their unique personality, skills, and interests
- How to research colleges to fully understand what they have to offer, including how to find those colleges that offer a lot of merit aid
- How to choose between SAT, ACT, and test optional
- The college application timeline
- College application strategies for success
- And how to think about financial aid options, both need based and merit based.

If you can't attend one of the four sessions, you'll get a recording so you won't miss any useful information. We also save time for Q& A in each session where you can ask questions about your child's situation and circumstance. Spots are going quickly. Head to [thecollegespy.com](http://thecollegespy.com) and then click on Services and Group Workshops to register for the next session. I hope to see you there.

**The College Spy's tip of the day:**

Today's tip has to do with a question you should always ask when visiting campuses. Always ask about upcoming changes on campus. By inquiring about future plans, you can learn valuable insights about the college's institutional priorities and the campus culture.

**This episode's college spotlight is on the College of Charleston.**

Charleston, South Carolina is a charming small city with a deep history and vibrant social scene filled with food and culture. The College of Charleston is nestled in the city's historic district and is laid out over several city blocks. Spanish Moss provides shade as you walk through the campus, where you will find a combination of historic and contemporary buildings. The campus has a relaxed and laid back feel. Students can be seen gathering in open spaces including the Cistern Yard, the heart of campus, which also hosts performances and other important events like graduation. The campus is 20 minutes from the beach and the year round mild climate makes the area ideal for many outdoor activities. The College of Charleston is a mid sized public college with approximately 9,000 undergraduates enrolled. Surprisingly for a state school, the student population is an almost even mix of in state and out of state students. The majority of out of state students hail from North Carolina, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York. Students are encouraged to get involved in the almost 250 student clubs and organizations on campus. Student interests drive these clubs, and you will find clubs that focus on community service, athletics, outdoor activities, and academic interests. Greek life is popular, and about 25 percent of students are members of fraternities and sororities. Freshmen live on campus in



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traditional style dorms in double or triple rooms. There are on campus housing options for upperclassmen, including the historic houses. These houses are a unique type of residence hall for students who are looking for a smaller living community. Some of the historic houses have themes including women's and gender studies and La Casa Hispana. The College of Charleston offers almost a hundred and fifty majors. The most popular majors are business administration, biology, psychology, communications, and public health. All new students participate in the first year experience. The goal of which is to assimilate them into the academic and cultural community. Students are encouraged to choose a seminar that allows them to study something that interests them.

Here are some interesting facts about the College of Charleston.

- The C of C was founded in 1770 and is one of the 13 oldest colleges in the country.
- The first class graduated in 1794 and consisted of 6 students.
- The campus is designated a National Arboretum and a National Historic Landmark.
- College of Charleston offers the only bachelor's degree in archaeology in South Carolina.
- On their first day on campus, freshmen pass through an arch, enter the cistern yard, and sign "The book". At graduation, graduates symbolically exit the yard. Graduates wear white dresses and dinner jackets instead of caps and gowns at graduation.

Famous alumni from College of Charleston:

- Brett Gardner of the New York Yankees
- Gil Yanks
- Robert Mills, architect of the Washington Monument
- John C. Fremont, governor of California
- And Matt Zucree, otherwise known as Logan on the Gilmore Girls, among other roles.

Some unique majors at College of Charleston are Archaeology, Classics, Historic Preservation and Community Planning, Meteorology, Hospitality and Tourism Management.

Thank you for listening to The College Spy podcast. For more information about The College Spy, visit our website at [thecollegespy.com](http://thecollegespy.com). For college admissions tips and up to date trends in admissions, follow The College Spy on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). Don't forget to like and subscribe to this podcast. We always appreciate five star reviews. See you next time.

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