

Secondary education is an invaluable tool for success. Unfortunately for many students with a chronic illness, the tool can be very challenging to thrive. College is a fast-paced, unique environment with little room for error. The stress of the schooling can exacerbate and even cause chronic illness. While some professors are accommodating, there are times when my professors were a hindrance. College is not “like the real world.” A case manager would potentially improve the schooling of many deserving students with unequal footing.

My name is Patricia Firmin and I attended the University of Maryland College Park. I received a bachelor’s degree in Chemical Engineering in 2018, three years later than my peers. By that point I was working full time. My chronic illness actually improved while starting my career. I am able to balance my abilities and needs with typical sick days and slow days on par with my co-workers. I am able to take FMLA when needed. The slower pace of “real world” has improved my invisible disability.

I have an official diagnosis of Fibromyalgia, although my symptoms match exactly with that of two rare auto-immune nerve disorders that my father suffers from. My symptoms include joint pain, extreme muscle weakness, dizziness, chills, and numbness. On my worst mornings, my energy level is so low that I have to decide whether to eat breakfast or brush my teeth. When my symptoms are especially bad and long-lasting, depression hits.

I did have official accommodations with the university through the DSS which was beneficial, but it only went so far. I missed mandatory attendance labs one-too-many times. My peers would rate me lower on group projects due to my absence in labs and meetings. When I had difficulty walking, the bus that I could schedule to bring me to classes would be overbooked, making it useless when my condition flared. Prior to my illness I was on the Dean’s List multiple times and in the Honors College. By the end of my college career, I had to drop out of my Honor’s Program and barely eked out a 3.0 GPA.

A case worker would have been very beneficial for my needs. Just getting through my day-to-day in university was exhausting. Keeping up with classes, handling the doctor’s appointments, and figuring out why my body was now failing me was an overload of stressors. Having a case manager in my corner to help with my challenging situations would have alleviated some of this stress. Having someone check in periodically to see if my needs are being met would have been a much-needed relief.

If the accommodations remain the same, I personally would not pursue a Master’s Degree in my field. My health would decline and I do not have trust in the system to bridge the gap between my needs and past expectations. I hope that in the future, anyone trying to achieve secondary education is not held back by their disability.