



IMPROVING COLLEGE TRANSITION ADVISING FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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As you support students navigating the transition from high school to college it is important to recognize the added layer of complexity faced by learners with disabilities and how to help them select the best college and make decisions that fit their access needs. Some students with disabilities may need a more physically accessible campus, others may determine virtual is the best option with flexibility for health care needs, and some might be looking for a college with a proven track record of providing accommodations. As students make this big life transition, advising takes an important role to ensure students with disabilities understand the legal changes from high school to college and supporting access decisions. Read on to learn answers to common questions about advising students with disabilities for the college transition.

Key Terms

- **Individualized Education Program (IEP):** Under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with documented disabilities have the right to receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This is achieved by providing disabled students with an IEP which includes specialized instruction, services, and supports tailored to their individual needs based on multi-disciplinary team evaluations. IEPs also require annual reviews and goal setting with progress monitoring in order to measure student progress, including at age 16 (in some states as early as 14) for transition from high school to postsecondary career and education. Graduating students also have a Summary of Performance (SOP) which may serve as a transition document.
- **504 Plan:** Under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, students with documented disabilities are eligible for accommodations to access learning alongside their peers. To accomplish this, schools develop plans that outline accommodations, called a 504 Plan. However, 504 Plans do not include specialized instruction.
- **Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA):** Passed in 1990, the ADA is the cornerstone civil rights law for people with disabilities. The ADA clearly defines disability in a broad sense as outlined by Congress, and prohibits discrimination of individuals with disabilities. The ADA created the right to equitable employment opportunities, access to government and state entities, and access to public settings (Titles I, II, and III respectively). The ADA allows disabled people to receive reasonable accommodations in employment and education, including college.

What is the Difference Between K-12 and Higher Education Disability Supports?

In PK-12, the onus is on the education system to identify a student's disability and what supports and services they need. This changes in college, often leading to the first time disabled students are required to self-advocate in order to access necessary support to learn alongside their peers.

In college, students must choose to self-disclose their disability to receive accommodations from their college's disability services office. When entering higher education, students lose many of the formalized supports and services they have become accustomed to, including specialized instruction and collaborative annual planning that included their parents. They also may be required to provide documentation for their disability in order to receive accommodations.

The transition from PK-12 to higher education is also a shift in responsibility and ownership of the process from parent to student. In PK-12, parents managed documents, engagement with the school, and advocacy. In higher education, the student must be the one to self-disclose and request accommodations. In addition, as the students are now adults, parents lose automatic access to records and some colleges won't give parents direct access to their young adult's information.

Can Students Receive Accommodations on College Admissions Exams?

Students with documented disabilities, including having an IEP or 504 Plan, are eligible to receive accommodations such as extended time and alternative formats when taking the SAT and ACT, as well as AP and IB exams. The process for requesting and receiving approval for the accommodations can take time. It is best practice to begin the conversations and process as early as possible. Additionally, testing sites may restrict the number of students with accommodations on various days. Preparing early and signing up for the test early are keys to success.

How Do I Help Students with Disabilities Find the Right College?

Finding the right college with appropriate supports and services is a key part of navigating the college process for students with disabilities. When beginning the college search with a student with a disability, spend time looking for and reviewing disability services and accessibility. Consider that if a university is not public about their accommodations process, engagement with disability services, or accessibility in the physical campus or digital spaces, that may not be a cultural fit for a student with a disability. Utilize the [National Center for College Students with Disabilities database](#) to search disability service providers at many colleges in the U.S. In addition to how the college or university explicitly names disability and accessibility, review and examine the best modality for students with disabilities. Will their learning style be best met with in person course work, online, or hybrid? Have conversations with the student, their family, and their teachers about their learning style, preferences, and how they best thrive

When reviewing college and university disability service offices and accessibility, look for how accommodations are approved and a description of the interactive process. As noted below, colleges and universities will ask for documentation of disability. Unfortunately, some colleges and universities will NOT accept an IEP or 504 Plan as an acceptable form of documentation and may require additional testing. This process should be included in the consideration of the best college or university for the student.

Does A Student's Disability Impact Their Federal Financial Aid?

It depends on the disability and each student's needs. Under Title IV's special circumstances provision, students with disabilities with greater expenses associated with their disability may be eligible for an adjustment to their cost of attendance - increasing their financial aid eligibility. This may include expenses necessary for a learner to attend college, such as assistive technology, mobility devices, and personal care assistance. To make adjustments to financial aid, students need to work with their college's financial aid office to file an amendment to their FAFSA.

How Do I Prepare and Support Students For Requesting Accommodations?

Once a student is ready to request academic or housing accommodations, they will need to engage with their college's accessibility office, which may be referred to as Disability Services Office, Accessibility Office, Disability Resource Center, Disability and Accessibility Services, Student Disability Services, and others. The first step is finding the correct office and contact.

Typically, each college and university will have a clearly defined process for requesting accommodations. Once the correct office has been identified, students will need to self-disclose through a formal form or request. A best practice is for this to occur once the student has been accepted or during orientation so accommodations may begin with the first day of classes. However, a student may apply at any time while they are enrolled in a higher education program.

The process for requesting and receiving accommodations in higher education is both iterative and interactive. Colleges and universities will ask for documentation of the disability and any supporting material of previously administered accommodations. Students may submit IEPs, 504 Plans, doctor evaluations, other documentation, or additional testing that provides the necessary information to determine if a student has a disability under the ADA and 504. After submitting documentation, there is often a meeting to discuss how their disability impacts their learning or access across the college or university. This conversation will typically lead to identifying accommodations and a formal letter students can share with faculty or other staff.

Students transitioning to higher education should have self-advocacy preparation to understand what accommodations may be appropriate in college and how to request such accommodations. This should include support about why it is important to self-disclose and have the support, even if it isn't always needed.

Where Can I Find More Information?

- Accessible College, [College Preparation and Transition Support for Students with Physical Disabilities and Health Conditions](#)
- ADA National Network, [Higher Education and the ADA](#)
- Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education, [Accessible by Design: A Comprehensive Playbook for Higher Education \(Ch. 4: Accommodations\)](#)
- College Board AP Central, [Requesting Accommodations for AP Exams](#)
- [Disability Rights, Education, Activism, & Mentoring Group for College Students with Disabilities](#), run by and for students
- U.S. Department of Education Guidance, [Transition of Students with Disabilities to Postsecondary Education: A Guide for High School Educators](#)
- U.S. Department of Education Q&A directed at students, [Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education](#)
- National Center for College Students with Disabilities, [Prove It! What is Disability “Documentation”?](#)
- National Center for Learning Disabilities, [Planning Your Future: A Guide to Transition](#)
- Psychology Today, [What Accommodations Can Students with LD Ask for at College?](#)
- SaveMyExams, [How To Get Extra Time in IB Exams](#)
- Swift Tool, [How can I request a change to my college financial aid package?](#)
- Understood, [How to Apply for SAT and ACT Accommodations](#) (Includes a list of typical SAT & ACT accommodations)