



Preparing Young Adults with Disabilities for College

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Every parent experiences some anxiety as they prepare to send their child to college, but for parents of children with disabilities, those anxious feelings can grow exponentially. Most young adults will start the process by researching potential schools, visiting them (if possible), applying, and ultimately waiting to hear results. The difference is that young adults with disabilities may need more assistance in the application process while also being mindful of the services that may (or may not) be available to them at the schools to which they are applying. Therefore, we are sharing some tips to help you better navigate this process.

Planning Ahead: Individualized Education Program (IEP) and Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA)

As someone with a disability, your child was likely provided accommodations by their local school district to assist them in succeeding academically. If your child has an Individualized Education Program (“IEP”), it is important to note that the IEP does not follow the child to college. The law that provides for an IEP, the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (“IDEA”), applies until a student graduates from high school.

While most colleges and universities also provide resources and assistance, the level at which they do so can vary greatly. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct your due diligence before applying to schools and consider what accommodations are necessary to help your child reach their academic goals.

If you think college is on the horizon for your child, start planning as early as their freshman year of high school. Some questions to consider include:

- *What are the services and/or accommodations my child receives in high school that can be replicated in college?*
- *What are my child’s “must-have” services for continued success in college?*

- *What (if any) services and/or accommodations should we start fading as my child gets older? For example, in freshman year, they may require many breaks during the day, but over time, they can reduce that number.*

Senior year is too late to start thinking about these questions, as your child will need to better understand their needs before they apply for accommodations and begin their freshman year of college.

Once you determine what colleges may meet your child's needs, another key decision is when and if they should disclose their disability. This is a very personal decision. Colleges are legally prohibited from discriminating against a student due to a disability. However, college admissions are very competitive, and it is understandable that students would be concerned about the impact of disclosing a disability on their application. On the other hand, disclosing a disability could help an admissions office understand an unusual pattern of grades or discrepancy between grades and standardized testing.

College Accommodations: Americans with Disabilities Act (ACT), FERPA

Colleges or universities that accept public funding must provide accommodations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act ("ADA"). The types of accommodations provided and how they are administered can be different in college than in high school.

For example, the burden shifts from schools being responsible for identifying and administering the student's needed accommodations, such as extra time to take tests or providing note-takers, to students being responsible for requesting and advocating for those accommodations themselves.

Therefore, it is vital for parents to teach their children how to self-advocate while still in high school. Additionally, colleges are not permitted to contact or share any academic information with parents (even if they are paying the tuition) without the student's permission. Your child can give their college or university permission to allow you (their parent) limited access to their education records via the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ("FERPA") by completing the FERPA form.

Services and Resources: Test-Taking, Sign Language, Parking, and More

The accommodations available vary from school to school; therefore, it is essential for you to research options based on your student's needs. Most schools have a disability services office designed to support students with disabilities. To receive accommodations, students must register with this office, and then be able to establish the need for the requested accommodations (usually by providing forms and/or reports from a medical or mental

health professional documenting the need for the accommodations sought). Some of the most common accommodations include:

- Sign language interpreters
- Test-taking accommodations, such as extended time and alternative formats
- Note-takers/scribes
- Course substitutions and/or waivers
- Special parking spaces

Your child should contact the disabilities services office soon after receiving an acceptance to their school. They may require documentation from your local school district or additional educational testing before providing accommodations. Make sure you have plenty of time to complete all the necessary steps to receive accommodations. Your child should be prepared to re-register with the disability services office each school year and obtain accommodations letters before the beginning of each semester.

For parents who are unsure how to get started in finding schools with a disability services office or what types of accommodations and services different schools offer, the first place to start is your child's high school counselor. There are also college consultants or school consulting and counseling companies that can help your child narrow down their choices and navigate the vast admissions landscape. Many of them will also help guide your child through the entire application process, keeping them on track to complete each application step, offer suggestions on essay topics, or edit your child's essays.

The transition from high school to college can be daunting. It is important to remember that each individual's journey through the application and acceptance process is unique. It is crucial to research and understand the resources and services that colleges are required to provide for students with disabilities. If you are unsure about the requirements, be sure to reach out to resources such as the [Special Needs Alliance](#). SNA members are attorneys who can guide you through the process. With the right support and understanding, students with disabilities can successfully navigate the college application process and thrive in their academic pursuits.

Additional Resources

- [What are a public or private college-university's responsibilities to students with disabilities?](#)
- [Auxiliary Aids and Services for Postsecondary Students with Disabilities](#)

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