

## Helping Students with Disabilities Successfully Transition to College

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### Introduction

The transition from high school to college is challenging for most students. College classes are more difficult, there's a heavier workload, and the independence of college is exciting but daunting. This new stage of life can be especially difficult for students with disabilities, who have to navigate a completely different system for obtaining accommodations, new instructors who don't know their needs, and other challenges to learning and daily life that may come with their disability. This paper will discuss key differences in the laws that determine supports in high school and college, the accommodation eligibility and determination process, and the types of accommodations that are available to students with disabilities in college.

### Differences between IDEA and ADA

What do parents, educators, and service providers need to know about providing disability-related supports for students transitioning to postsecondary education? One of the first things to understand is that, in a K-12 setting, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, is one of the primary legal basis for all supports. When students make the transition to higher education, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), replaces IDEA as the primary legal basis. The table below summarizes the key differences between these laws and is followed by a more in-depth description of each key component.

### Differences between Disability Supports in K-12 vs. Higher Ed

Key Component	IDEA (K-12)	ADA (Higher Ed)
<b>How disability is defined?</b>	One of 13 categories	Impairment to a major life activity

<b>What is the focus?</b>	Area of disability and need for specialized instruction	Functional impact /impairment
<b>What type of law is it?</b>	Educational and entitlement to services	Civil rights and eligibility to receive services
<b>Whose responsibility is it to set up services?</b>	Parent and school	Student and (to a lesser extent) institution
<b>What does it ensure?</b>	Student success	Equal access
<b>What services does it mandate?</b>	Evaluation, remediation, and special accommodation	Reasonable accommodations

Adapted from *The Parent's Guide to College for Students on the Autism Spectrum*, by J. Thierfeld Brown, et al, 2012.

## How is Disability Defined?

In IDEA, there are 13 categories of disabilities such as Specific Learning Disability, Other Health Impairment, or Autism. Students are deemed eligible for services if they have a disability that falls into one of these categories, that disability has an adverse educational impact, and the student needs specialized instruction. On the other hand, the ADA focuses more broadly on areas of impairment rather than on disability or categories of disabilities.

To determine if a student is eligible for accommodations or disability-related supports in a college or university, the focus is on whether there is an impairment to a major life activity. And that could be anything from impairment in thought processes, interacting in a testing setting, or performance in math or English. It could also apply to non-academic activities that take place on a college campus, such as dining and residential activities.

## What is the Focus?

In IDEA, the focus is on the area of disability and the need for specialized instruction. The ADA focuses more on the actual functional impact of a disability. Let's use a learning disability, as an example. Because learning disability is such a broad category, IDEA would suggest certain services are available for a student who falls into that category. Whereas under ADA, the diagnosis is less relevant than how the disability affects the student, such as difficulty in reading comprehension vs. mental math calculations.

IDEA is fundamentally an educational law. It is about entitlement to specific education-related services and doesn't apply outside the educational setting. On the other hand, ADA is essentially a civil rights law that ensures equal access across all parts of our society. As such, ADA is much broader in scope and extends beyond education. It is through interpretations of the ADA and case law established by the court system that the application of ADA across different settings is understood.

## Whose Responsibility is it to Set up Services?

In the K-12 setting, parents serve as their child's advocate, requesting services, and providing information about their child so that the school can then step in to provide the services to mitigate the disability. While parents often initiate the process for students to be identified with a disability under IDEA, school personnel can also refer students for evaluation and are involved in the actual assessment of the child as part of this process. This responsibility shifts in a fundamental way when students move to higher education and the protections of ADA. In higher education, it is not the parent or the school that drives services. Rather, this is the responsibility of the student, who is now an adult, through their own self-advocacy. In conjunction with the student, the college or university works to help implement eligible services or provide measures of accessibility that a student couldn't implement on their own. Today, most colleges and universities have a dedicated disability services office to assist in this process.

## What do the Two Acts Ensure?

IDEA ensures students have access to a free and appropriate public education designed to support their educational progress. In a K-12 setting, it is the responsibility of the school to ensure that the student has the supports and services needed to be successful. While this may be limited to providing basic accommodations and specialized instruction such as an evidence-based reading program for a student with a learning disability in the area of reading, it can also involve fundamental alterations to an academic curriculum with students working on aligned standards that are different from the majority of their same-age peers. Of course, student success is a primary goal in higher education, but there's no legal requirement that makes it the responsibility of the university for the student to succeed. In higher education, the ADA only ensures equal access. Success is up to the student. It is the university's responsibility to provide support and break down the barriers that students may encounter in pursuit of achieving that success.

## What Services do these Acts Mandate?

In K-12, IDEA dictates that evaluation, remediation, and specialized accommodations are offered to students. Once students transition to higher education, evaluation and remediation are no longer mandated. The focus becomes providing reasonable accommodations. Additional services, such as access to academic coaches, learning specialists, or dedicated programs for students with learning disabilities may be found on many campuses, however, they are not mandatory.

# College Accommodation Eligibility and Determination Process

## Who is Eligible?

Disability services offices work with students with a broad range of disabilities or impairments. Some of the most common include cognitive impairments, learning disabilities, ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder, traumatic brain injuries, sensory impairments or mobility issues. Additionally, psychological and emotional conditions are quickly increasing among college students as they deal with anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, or personality disorders that sometimes occur during early adulthood. Disability services offices also work with students with chronic health issues and medical conditions or even temporary conditions. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, increased focus has been placed on the needs of students who may be immunocompromised and their ability to engage in various in-person activities.

## The Registration Process

Historically, different universities had different requirements for registering with a disability services office. In a move towards inclusion and access, and following standardized guidelines from the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), those requirements and the registration process have generally been simplified and are some variation of the following:

Step 1) Complete an intake form

Step 2) Provide documentation

Step 3) Meet with Disability Services staff to discuss reasonable accommodations

### Step 1) Complete an Intake form

The first step in registering with the disability services office is to self-disclose a need for services by completing that institution's version of an intake form. This allows students to share information about their impairments and history. Students can also discuss the accommodations that they have received in the past or will need when enrolling in a university. Ideally, the best time to complete intake paperwork and documentation is in the late spring or early summer before enrollment. Students who go through the registration process early will be prepared to work with their instructors on accommodations when they start classes. However, a university is required to engage in this interactive process with a student anytime. It is important to note that accommodations are typically not retroactive and may take some time to appropriately implement.

### Step 2) Provide Documentation

Documentation of impairment from an appropriately licensed professional is needed for disability services personnel to identify the reasonable accommodations a student may be eligible for and require. Colleges and universities across the country are increasingly taking the

position that they do not want this step to become a barrier to accessing services and will work with the student to get the necessary documentation.

Typical guidelines usually request that a student provides documentation confirming the presence of a disability or chronic condition. Such documentation should come from an appropriately licensed professional and focus on areas of impairment rather than just the diagnosis. For example, a statement that says, "John has ADHD" doesn't tell us much about John or the kinds of supports he will need when he enrolls in a college or university. If the disability services office gets a letter that says, "John has ADHD and it manifests with poor attention and difficulty with working memory," then the disability services personnel can look at how the impairment is going to affect John in the academic setting and provide accommodations accordingly. A label will not dictate the range of services that the student should be approved for. Personnel in the disability services office need to think about the impact in a specific setting so that the approach to supporting the student may be individualized.

Additionally, this information should come from an appropriate treatment provider. For example, a chiropractor or a therapist with whom the student met once, briefly, over the internet, would not be considered an appropriate source of documentation.

## Common Documentation Questions

### **How recent should the documentation be?**

Documentation should be recent enough to provide information about how the disability currently impacts the student. Disability services personnel can help the student either get updated documentation from a current provider or locate a provider who could provide more recent information that gives insight into how the student's disability might impact them in a higher education setting. There are no concrete timelines on how recent the information needs to be. It is important to work as holistically as possible with the student to determine how the information they have provided can be used or how more information can be obtained.

### **Does a student need to provide a comprehensive psychological report particularly if the student has a cognitive impairment such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, or a learning disability?**

These comprehensive psychological reports can be very costly. Disability services personnel want to make sure that the cost of obtaining services or documentation isn't a barrier to working with the disability services office. While such reports are incredibly helpful and informative, many disability services offices work to take a more holistic approach rather than implementing strict requirements. For example, if a student has been working with a mental health provider for multiple years, that provider may provide a statement about how the disability impacts the student, even if they haven't done any formal psychoeducational or neuropsychological testing.

### **Do IEP or 504 plans serve as appropriate documentation?**

Whether an IEP plan or a 504 plan serves as appropriate documentation depends on factors such as the types of documentation that the plan was based on, as well as the age of the documentation. If the last diagnostic information about impairment is from when the student was in elementary school, that information may not be relevant in a college setting. If a student had an updated plan in the junior or senior year of high school, that information will be very relevant. IEP plans developed in a student's junior or senior year of high school that include intellectual testing, achievement testing, and describe the student's history, generally provide the most pertinent information.

### **Will accommodations from high school IEPs and 504 plans transfer with the student to college exactly as they were written in high school?**

Some supports included in IEP and 504 plans will transfer with the student to college. For example, additional time for taking exams would likely be a reasonable accommodation for a student who received it in high school. Also, if a student used sign language interpreters because they are deaf or hard of hearing, these services will also be needed and appropriate in a higher education setting. On the other hand, many supports offered at the K-12 level may no longer be considered reasonable in a higher education setting. For example, at the high school level, students are sometimes provided with study guides or are permitted to bring note cards or an open book during exams. At the college level, this is not considered a reasonable accommodation as it would provide an advantage to the student, rather than equal access.

### **Could a student or family member submit letters from their case manager and other teachers stating how their disability has affected them in the classroom?**

These statements from secondary education professionals are useful in identifying the strategies that have been helpful to the student and which may apply at the college level. However, when diagnostic information about a disability is needed, an appropriately licensed professional must provide this information.

### **Can a summary of performance from the existing IEP be submitted?**

A summary of performance is often the most current documentation regarding the impact of disability on the student's level of performance. Summaries of performance that document progress toward IEP goals, rather than performance in different subject areas, are helpful and may be considered relevant documentation to consider in addition to the documentation from testing or treatment professionals.

### **In addition to their IEP, should students submit their last documentation of eligibility for special education services?**

Eligibility documentation would be an additional relevant, supplemental source of information for a disability services office. The purpose of reviewing documentation is to understand the student's impairment around the time they're making the transition and how has it affected them recently. Keep in mind that the focus is not just on the student in the classroom, studying, and taking exams. College represents a new environment for the student, so the focus is going to be more broadly on how a student interacts with all aspects of life.

### **Step 3) Meet with Disability Services Staff to Discuss Reasonable Accommodations**

The third step to registering with the disability services office and receiving accommodations involves meeting with disability services staff members to discuss what services are available and what reasonable accommodations they might be approved for. This will be based on information from the intake form, the documentation of disability that the student provided, and, most importantly, information shared by the student during this initial meeting. During this initial meeting, if accommodations are formally approved, the student will learn about how they should implement them in various settings.

It is important to note that this is not, necessarily, a one-and-done meeting. Additionally, a student may request a follow-up at any point in their academic career to reevaluate their needs for accommodations and make any necessary changes.

### **Categories of Accommodations**

While there are different categories of accommodations, the accommodations that apply to higher education fall into two categories.

#### **Essential Functions of the Academic Program**

The first category involves changes that enable a student with a disability to perform the essential functions of a program. For example, if a student has an attentional issue affecting their ability to process information, this may manifest by significantly slowing their reading pace. If they are going to be taking an exam, it is important to ensure they have sufficient time to take that exam and they're not penalized because they're not able to complete an exam in the time allocated. The content of the exam would not change, as this would fundamentally alter the assignment and create an unfair advantage or disadvantage. Instead, by extending the time they have to take the same exam, the student is assessed on how much they know, not how much they can complete in the allotted time. This minor change that allows the student to perform the essential functions of that program would be considered a reasonable accommodation.

Additional examples of academic accommodations include:

- Recording lectures
- Private testing rooms
- Designated seating
- Brief breaks during class
- Early access to course registration

## Equal Benefits and Privileges of the Program

Another category of accommodations enables a student with a disability to enjoy equal benefits of a program. For example, some students have significant mental health concerns such as severe anxiety, depression, or PTSD. These students may not function well in a hectic, highly populated residence hall. Some may not be able to live with multiple roommates. While they may want to enjoy the opportunities that are available through residential living on campus, they may not be able to because of the way their disability affects them in a residential setting. In this case, a reasonable accommodation might be to alter their housing placement by switching them to a single room.

Additional accommodations that enable students to enjoy equal benefits of a program include:

- Reduction or cancellation of dining plan due to a medical condition
- Emotional support animals
- Specialized equipment
- Assistive listening devices
- Special access to facilities

## Conclusion

The role of disability services offices is to ensure that students with disabilities receive equal access to academic and other programs offered on college campuses. Education professionals can help students make a successful transition to college by informing students of the benefits of these services and how to access them. The students who are most successful in making this transition are those who begin the process long before stepping foot on campus.

## References

Thierfeld Brown, J., Wolf, L.E., King, L., & Kukiela Bork, G.R. (2012). *The Parent's Guide to College for Students on the Autism Spectrum*. AAPC.