College Access - Disability Rights After High School
A Resource Document

The Big Change. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process do not continue into college. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) still protect qualified students with disabilities, but the student must generally start the process and ask for help.

What Changes After High School

High School → Postsecondary shift	What It Means
No IEPs or 504 plans in college	Colleges do not write or follow IEPs or 504 plans the student had in high school. They do not have the K–12 duty to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) under IDEA.
The student needs to ask for help	The student generally tells the disability or accessibility office about the disability and asks for academic adjustments, auxiliary aids, or reasonable modifications.
The college may ask for records	The college will request reasonable documentation showing a current disability and why the requested help is needed. An IEP or 504 Plan is useful documentation but may not be enough by itself.
Equal access—not guaranteed success	The college must provide an equal opportunity to participate in college offerings and activities. It does not have to guarantee passing grades or remove an essential academic or technical requirement.
Some personal services are not required	A college generally does not have to provide a personal attendant, individually prescribed device, personal-use reader, personal tutoring, or another service that is personal in nature.
Privacy rights shift to the student	At a postsecondary school, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) rights generally belong to the student. Unless they are the student's guardian, parents will need the student's written permission before staff can discuss or share records or accommodations.

Who is Protected?

Section 504 and the ADA generally protect a student who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a record of such an impairment, or is regarded as having one. To receive a particular adjustment, the student must be qualified for the program and show a disability-related need for that adjustment/accommodation.

- Disabilities may be visible or nonvisible. Examples can include learning disabilities, ADHD, autism, mobility or sensory disabilities, chronic health conditions, and mental health conditions.
- A diagnosis does not automatically lead to a particular accommodation. The college considers how the disability affects this student in their individual classes/activities.
- Disclosure is voluntary. But the college cannot arrange disability-related accommodations that it does not know are needed.

What Help Might Be Available?

Colleges often use the terms academic adjustments, auxiliary aids and services, or accommodations. The right support depends on the student, the disability, the course, and the program. Not every student with the same disability will receive the same accommodation.

Area	Possible examples	Important limit
Classes and Testing	Extended test time; reduced-distraction setting; accessible course materials; note-taking support; recording device; sign-language interpreter; assistive technology.	The adjustment should provide access without changing what the course is designed to teach or measure.
Policies and Schedules	Priority registration; reduced course load; additional time to complete a degree; reasonable attendance or deadline flexibility when appropriate.	Colleges may keep essential attendance, participation, safety, licensing, and academic standards.
Program Access	Accessible classrooms, labs, websites, learning platforms, housing, dining, transportation, and campus activities.	The college determines what is reasonable and effective on a case-by-case basis.

Remember: A high school accommodation is strong evidence of what has helped, but the college is not required to copy it automatically. The college and student should discuss an effective adjustment for the postsecondary setting.

How to Request Accommodations

- If the student has not decided what college to attend, **college visits** are always a good idea to check out physical, academic, and social/recreational accessibility and see if the environment is welcoming and inclusive. Visit the Disability Services Office while you are there.
- Find the college's **disability or accessibility services webpage**. Read its deadlines, forms, documentation guidance, and process for sending accommodation letters to instructors.
- **Contact the office early**—ideally after admission and before classes or placement testing. A student does not have to disclose a disability during the admissions process to request accommodations later.
- **Submit the requested information**. Useful records may include a recent evaluation, diagnostic report, medical or treatment-provider letter, testing data, an IEP or 504 Plan, and the high school's Summary of Performance.
- **Explain the impact of your disability**. Describe what happens in reading, writing, concentrating, communicating, moving around campus, testing, labs, clinical work, housing, dining, or other activities without support.
- Ask for **specific accommodations** and explain why each one is needed. The office may suggest another equally effective adjustment.
- **Complete any required follow-through**. Many colleges require students to renew requests each term, send letters to each instructor, schedule exams, or request accessible materials in advance.

Do not wait for a crisis. Once accommodations are approved, they usually take effect from that point forward and do not apply to anything before that time. A college may need time to review records and arrange services, so starting early matters.

Documentation: What Families Can Do

- If you do not have them, **ask the high school** for complete copies of the current IEP or 504 Plan, recent evaluations, eligibility records, test results, accommodation history, and progress data.

- If the student receives IDEA services, request the required **Summary of Performance** when the student exits because of graduation with a regular diploma or aging out. It should summarize academic achievement and functional performance and include recommendations for postsecondary goals.
- Check each college's **documentation rules** before paying for a new evaluation. Requirements can differ. If more information is needed, ask exactly what is missing and whether other forms of evidence will be considered.
- Explore whether **vocational rehabilitation services** through the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) or the Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired (DBVI) may be able to assist if the student requires college to obtain an employment goal and is eligible for VR services.
- Keep a **secure digital folder** with records, request forms, accommodation letters, emails, and notes of meetings.

Remember: A parent can still be an important coach. But college staff generally work directly with the student. A FERPA release may allow communication; it does not transfer decision-making back to the parent or require the college to include the parent in every conversation.

What If an Approved Accommodation is Delayed, Denied, or Not Working

- **Write down** what happened, when, who was involved, and how access was affected. Save emails, course instructions, and the accommodation letter.
- **Contact the accessibility office** promptly. Ask for an interactive review and an interim solution if timing is urgent.
- If needed, **contact the college's Section 504/ADA coordinator** and use the school's disability grievance or appeal process. Ask for the decision and reasons in writing.
- A student may also file a **disability-discrimination complaint** with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR). Using the college's grievance process first is not always required. OCR complaints typically must be filed within 180 calendar days of the last alleged act; special timing rules may apply after a grievance (complaint) is filed with the college or university.

Retaliation is prohibited. A school may not punish someone for requesting disability-related help, raising discrimination concerns, or participating in a civil rights process.

Accessibility Planning Checklist

☐ Compare accessibility office procedures at every school under serious consideration.

☐ Ask about documentation, review time, appeals, testing arrangements, accessible materials, housing, dining, transportation, clinical placements, internships, and study abroad, as relevant.

☐ Collect high school and medical/evaluation records before graduation.

☐ Practice a short explanation of functional limitations and helpful supports.

☐ Register early and keep track of all follow-up deadlines.

☐ Build a support network: advisor, accessibility specialist, counseling center, tutoring or learning center, health services, and vocational rehabilitation counselor.

☐ Review financial aid rules before reducing your course load or withdrawing from a course.

☐ Create an emergency and medication plan, if needed.

Resources

ADA.gov website

U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights: Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education

- Academic Adjustments for Postsecondary Students
- Auxiliary Aids and Services for Postsecondary Students with Disabilities
- How to File a Discrimination Complaint with OCR
- The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act Guidance for Eligible Students

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