

EDUCATION EQUITY

Helping Students with Disabilities Understand Accommodations in College

High school educators can play an important role in preparing students to request accommodations in college.

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The transition to college is a challenging time for all students, and especially for students with disabilities who need to navigate the accommodations system at their new institution.

A federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, guarantees a free and appropriate education to students in high school, but there is no legal requirement for postsecondary institutions to provide a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities. Instead, the Americans With Disabilities Act and another federal regulations simply guarantee equal access and ban discriminatory practices.

Colleges are not required to monitor students or require the use of accommodations by students. Concerned professors sometimes refer students to the disability services office if they feel assistance might be needed, but there is no requirement for instructors to refer students.

High school educators can play an important role in preparing students for requesting accommodations in college.

REQUESTING ACCOMMODATION

High school accommodation plans do not transfer to college. Students must initiate the process, and they must be able to articulate the impact of their disability in the academic setting. No longer can parents and school personnel put accommodations in place for students.

Students must contact the college's disability services office (DSO) to indicate that they would like accommodations. There are a few reasons why students choose not to use accommodations in college, and some of them may be reasons you just can't talk them out of right now. They want to be independent. They want to be "like everyone else." It's just one more thing to think about, when they really want to focus on meeting new people, how to navigate campus, and where to find food.

Let them know that the accommodations process is typically very easy in college— often much easier than in high school. Students may be encouraged to know that, unlike in most high schools, they can easily use accommodations in college without classmates knowing about it.

Registering with the DSO obligates them to absolutely nothing, and it remains confidential. Even if students don't use accommodations right away, they will have this important step done, which makes it easier to begin using accommodations should they ever decide to do so. Students may register with the DSO at any point, but it's ideal to do so a few weeks before classes begin.

PREPARING FOR THE MEETING

During an individual meeting between the college representative and the student, the student must explain why he needs accommodations. He doesn't necessarily need a deep understanding of which accommodations are possible, but he does need to be able to explain the challenges he faces. Parents may attend the meeting with their student as support.

Before the meeting, show students the DSO website at the college they plan to attend, and talk about how to engage in the process. Teach them how to articulate their strengths and challenges. For example, talk them through how their disability challenges them when they are listening to lectures, taking notes, and taking tests. Help them identify when they feel most confident in class. Involving them in meetings related to their disability during high school can be a useful way to prepare them for the college meeting.

Colleges will also require some sort of documentation from a health care provider related to the disability. Provide students with a most recent copy of their documentation, including psycho-educational evaluations, if you have them.

The need for accommodations in college is generally assessed on two factors: necessity and reasonableness. To determine that an accommodation is necessary, there must be a nexus between the accommodation being requested and the functional limitations associated with the disability.

For example, a request by a student with ADHD for the use of a calculator on tests due to the fact that she experiences slower processing speeds may not be approved because an accommodation for extended time more appropriately addresses the specific functional limitation. Conversely, a student with a learning disability in math may be approved to use a basic calculator on tests because she has a functional limitation specific to math.

Even if an accommodation is necessary, it may not be reasonable in all cases in college. For example, the student with a learning disability in math may not be allowed to use her basic calculator on a college test that is assessing calculation skills, but she may be able to use it in a higher-level class that is not testing students on their calculation skills. In other words, an accommodation is not reasonable if it would, in essence, replace the very skills and knowledge students must independently demonstrate.

TYPES OF ACCOMMODATION

More often, than not, college students can receive many of the same accommodations they did in high school. However, there are some that are typically not appropriate in college, because they overstep the boundary of simply providing equal access. For example, an accommodation allowing multiple attempts at tests, in order to achieve a particular score, would not be allowed.

There is no exhaustive list of accommodations in college because everything is considered on an individual basis, but some accommodations are prevalent across institutions. Testing accommodations may include extended time or a separate testing environment. Note-taking services and books in audio format are also popular accommodations because they address a wide variety of needs. Other options may include sign language interpreting, accessible desks, flexible attendance, and on-campus housing accommodations.

Any determination by the DSO can be appealed to a higher authority at the college. Colleges are required to have a transparent grievance process for students.

Students will ultimately use accommodations if, and when, they believe they need them to be successful. Educators can equip students with some basic information about the process and encourage them to opt in.