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7 Things to Know About College Disability Services

By The Understood Team



If your child has had an [IEP](#) or a [504 plan](#) in high school, you've been able to play a role in the process. You've had access to the people who are providing supports and services. And you've been able to monitor how well those supports [are being implemented](#).

College is a different story—starting with the fact that there [are no IEPs](#) or special education in college. For some parents, that can be hard to adjust to at first. Still, almost all colleges have a disability services office for students with learning and attention issues.

Here are seven things to know about college disability services, and how they differ from high school.

1. Colleges don't have the same legal obligations as high schools.

Colleges don't fall under the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#). That's why there are no [IEPs](#).

This means colleges don't have to provide the same level of [supports and services](#) a student might have gotten in high school. For instance, they don't have to provide specialized instruction or tutoring.

They do have to follow federal civil rights laws, however. That includes Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#).

These laws have [a different goal than IDEA](#). Their purpose is to ensure equal access for people with disabilities and protect them against discrimination.

Colleges provide accommodations to students who are eligible under ADA. (Some may also provide support services like tutoring or coaching for a fee.) They don't typically provide [504 plans](#) the same way high schools do, though.

Colleges also don't have to give a student the same types of academic supports that he had in high school. But if a student can provide evidence that he needs a specific accommodation, he's eligible to get it in college.

He's not likely to find more personalized help, however. That includes things like having someone make him a study guide or reframe study questions.

2. Your child must register as a student with disabilities to get accommodations.

The process of applying for [accommodations](#) happens separately from the college application process. It usually begins after your child has been accepted and has enrolled at the college he wants to attend.

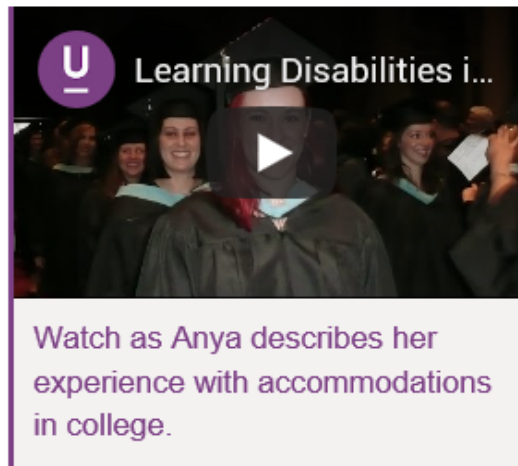
In order to get accommodations in college, he needs to register as a student with disabilities. This happens with the disability services office, not the admissions office.

Simply writing about his issues in his college application doesn't guarantee he'll get accommodations. Neither does providing a copy of his IEP or evaluation during the application process.

Admissions offices typically won't look at these things before admitting a student. Under ADA, they're not allowed to accept or request any information about a student's disabilities.

Colleges usually have instructions for how to register for disability services on their website. Your child should look for the instructions on the page for the school's disability services office. (The name of the office might not have the word "disability" in it. Your child can also look for words like "access" "equity," or "accommodations.")

The process typically involves completing a registration or application form. Your child may have to log into the school's system with his student ID to do that, or he may be able to print the form. (Someone from the office will sit down with your child for a one-on-one intake. This is a good time for your child to speak about his need for accommodations and support services.)



3. The requirements for documentation in college are changing.

Your child will need to provide evidence of his disability to get accommodations. Colleges have typically required the most recent high school evaluation report. But lately, some have moved away from that.

Many colleges also have a requirement for how *recent* the evidence must be. Often, the requirement is three years or less. But that's also changing at some colleges.

When it comes to documentation, your child should check with the disability services office at the college he's chosen.

4. There are no “case managers” in college.

Your child may have a dedicated contact person at the disability services office. That will continue for as long as your child is seeking accommodations. But this person doesn't function in the same way as a high school case manager.

First, she'll work with your child to determine “reasonable” accommodations. These might be academic, such as the use of a note taker for lectures. Or they might be non-academic, like having a single dorm room.

She'll then write an “accommodation letter” listing the ones your child is entitled to get. The letter will be addressed to the faculty in your child's courses for that semester.

The process for informing professors about a student's accommodations varies. At some colleges, the disability services officer will email them. But it's more likely your child will have to give the letter to professors himself. He'll also have to explain his accommodation needs.

No matter how the message is delivered, it will only say that the student has been approved for accommodations. It won't say what his disability is, to protect his privacy. But if he wants to [tell his professors about it](#), he can.

5. Different schools offer different levels of support.

All colleges that get federal funds must ensure equal access to students with disabilities. That means they have to provide reasonable accommodations.

Accommodations aren't the same as modifications. A student wouldn't be allowed to bring a list of formulas into a statistics test, for instance. That would be a modification. Giving extra time for the test is an example of an accommodation.

Here are some other [typical accommodations in college](#):

- Use of note-takers for class lectures
- Making audio recordings of lectures
- Use of a laptop computer in the classroom
- Taking exams in a distraction-reduced room

Some colleges go beyond that and provide a greater range of supports. (That's not counting [schools with specific programs for students with learning and attention issues](#).)

Some colleges may have professional tutors with a background in learning and attention issues, for instance. Or they might run study skills and time-management workshops. The difference is, none of these services are required by law in college.

It's a good idea to visit with the disability services office or the person who coordinates services at the colleges your child is interested in attending. Both you and your child can ask questions about potential supports and services.

One area to ask about is [assistive technology](#). Find out what might be available for your child.

6. You're no longer automatically in the loop.

When your child was in high school, you were legally entitled to be part of the process. It's the exact opposite when your child is in college. The law protects your child's privacy. So if you want to talk to the disability services officer or anyone else involved with your child's accommodations, you'll need permission from both your child and the school.

7. Colleges don't provide evaluations for learning and attention issues.

After high school, your child will have to go for a private evaluation if he wants updated test results, or if he suspects he may have an undiagnosed learning or attention issue.

There are big differences between supports in high school and in college for students with learning and attention issues. But while you can't play a direct role once your child is in college, there are still things you can do to help him succeed. For instance, you can work together to [create a time management system](#).

Hear from an expert on [why it's important to let your child take the lead in finding a college](#). Get suggestions for [making the application process less stressful](#). And learn [how to tell if your child is emotionally ready to go away to college](#).

About the Author



The Understood Team is composed of writers, editors and community moderators, many of whom have children with learning and attention issues.

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