

Transitioning from High School to College Help for Students with Learning Disabilities

An increasing number of students with learning and attention disorders plan to attend college, and that is great news! However, negotiating the process of taking standardized tests (possibly with accommodations), choosing the right colleges, and then navigating the application process can be overwhelming, even for the most organized student. Those who successfully gain acceptance to the schools of their choice are often frustrated to find that the accommodations they received in high school are not automatically granted in college. For students with learning disabilities (LD) making a successful transition to college is a multi-year process and a team effort that requires input from the student, parents, school personnel, and other professionals.

When is the best time to start planning the transition?

Federal regulation, Section 614(D)(I)(vii)(II), requires that “beginning at the age of 16 (or younger, if determined appropriate by the IEP

Team), a statement of needed transition services for the child, including, when appropriate, a statement of the interagency responsibilities or any needed linkages,” needs to be included in educational planning. The “statement of needed transition services” is a long-range plan to assist students in their steps toward adult life. Some states require that these services begin even earlier when the child is age 14.

For the Individualized Education Program (IEP) to be most beneficial it should be an outcome-driven document, meaning that the goals set in the IEP should focus on exactly what the student plans to do when he or she graduates from high school. To do this effectively, the student’s post-secondary goals should be delineated early, and it is, at least in part, the school’s obligation to help the student secure the skills needed to achieve this goal.

The table below provides a timeline of activities that will help students and their parents prepare for the transition from high school to college.

Grade Level	Activity/Task
Ninth and tenth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss options for after high school (for example, gap year, employment, vocational school, community college, or four-year university). • Develop self-advocacy skills. Make sure the student understands and can articulate his or her learning struggles and why accommodations are needed. Students should actively participate in IEP meetings and practice self-advocacy skills in those meetings. • Explain strengths and weaknesses to the student to develop his or her understanding for more effective self-advocacy.
Tenth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare for standardized testing (by the end of the year): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Apply for accommodations; and ○ Take test preparation course. <p>(continued on page 2)</p>

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Grade Level	Activity/Task
Eleventh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Register for SAT or ACT. • Investigate colleges. • Make a list of criteria for selecting a college (for example, class size, availability of support services, and finances) with the help of parents and school personnel. • Encourage participation in extracurricular and leadership activities as well as community service. Admission counselors are looking for applicants who are actively engaged in their schools and communities. • Visit prospective schools (by spring).
Twelfth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminate some schools to shorten list of prospective of schools before applying. • Finalize applications by mid-November. (Support from parents and school personnel is very important at this stage. Students with organizational challenges may find it daunting to simultaneously secure letters of reference, write essays, and complete forms while also keeping up with regular academic demands.) • Communicate regularly with school administration to be certain that the student has the academic requirements needed to graduate from high school and apply to the colleges he or she wishes to attend.
Twelfth (summer after)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop independent living skills (for example, refilling medications and doing laundry). • Communicate regularly with the appropriate office at the college of choice to secure accommodations prior to arriving in the fall. Once on campus, students will need to learn to access various resources and implement strategies such as maintaining a calendar, using the library, and becoming involved in study groups.
College years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan and schedule carefully, monitor and modify the original plan for accommodations as necessary.

How can the student secure accommodations on standardized testing (SAT, ACT, and AP tests)?

Parents should contact the student’s guidance counselor (or the person at the student’s school that coordinates testing) at least several months before the student plans to take a standardized test. This person will need a copy of any school or outside psychological testing that the student has had completed. The counselor or coordinator will complete the appropriate paperwork, and the parents will have to sign an accommodation request form to be sent to the ACT or SAT College Board office.

How does the student prepare the documentation and test application when requesting accommodations on standardized tests?

Admissions testing policies and procedures vary and are updated from time to time, so the student and his or her parents are encouraged to go to the test’s website and review the documentation policy statement for each test the student plans to take. In general, they will need to do the following:

- Make sure the documentation is current according to the guidelines put forth by the

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various testing entities. Shelf life of the documentation varies by diagnosis and testing entity, so check the various testing websites frequently for documentation requirements. Some students may not need to submit documentation and, in some cases, only an update, rather than a full evaluation, is required.

- If the student must update testing, be sure to share with the examiner a copy of the documentation requirements put forth by the different testing entities on their websites. Keep in mind that the documentation must provide a strong rationale for any disability-related accommodations.
- Plan well in advance. Accommodation requests are due months before the actual test date. If re-evaluation is needed, it may take weeks or months to complete, and once the test application is submitted, the review process can take six to eight weeks.

What services are typically available at college?

Colleges and universities offer several types of programs for students with LD, including:

- **Structured Programs (SP)**—comprehensive programs that may have additional costs associated with them. These services might include separate admission procedures, compulsory strategies, one-on-one tutoring, and student monitoring.
- **Coordinated Services (CP)**—services that are used as needed. These services are not comprehensive, they have less structure, and participation is voluntary.
- **Services (S)**—the least comprehensive services of the three categories. Students who require minimum accommodations, but find comfort in knowing services are available, might benefit from exploring colleges that provide these.

When should the student make contact with the college's office of support services?

Most students benefit from making contact with the coordinator or director of the disability services office in their junior year of high school. It gives the student time to learn the types of support the school offers and determine if the college or university can accommodate his or her needs.

May students use an IEP or 504 Plan when they attend college?

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and amendments to that act in 2008 apply very differently at the college level than K–12.

The IEP and 504 Plan do not apply in the post-secondary school setting. Updated testing may be necessary for the coordinator in the office of support services at the college to review.

Testing for most post-secondary schools should be done when the student is at least 16 years old because schools want the “adult versions” of psychological tests, which can be administered when the student reaches age 16. The Association on Higher Education has proposed seven essential elements of documentation at the college level, and most schools, although not all, have adopted this or a similar list (see each college's website for specific documentation requirements):

1. Documentation is provided by a licensed or otherwise properly credentialed professional with appropriate training and experience.
2. Documentation contains a clear diagnostic statement that describes how the diagnosis was made, provides information about the functional impact of the disability, and details the prognosis.
3. Documentation may contain both formal and informal methods of evaluation. Formal, standardized assessment may include diagnostic criteria, methods and procedures, tests and dates of administration, and a clinical narrative. Informal methods might

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include, among other things, the history of accommodations, educational situations, and the extent of the disability's impact, but it should not be used solely to make a case for accommodations.

4. Documentation should contain information on how learning is currently affected. Currency of documentation, while important, should be flexible and will vary by institution and diagnosis.
5. Documentation should provide information on any expected or cyclical changes in the functional impact of the disability over time and context and any known or suspected environmental impacts.
6. Documentation should be comprehensive in that it includes a description of both current and past auxiliary aids, assistive devices, support services, and accommodations, including their effectiveness in the educational setting.
7. Documentation that includes recommendations from professionals with a history of working with the student is often useful for determining effective accommodations.

At the college level, it is the student's responsibility, rather than the school's, to initiate the process for services and accommodations, and accommodations are not retroactive. For these reasons, it is wise to secure accommodations well before the first day of class of the freshman year.

What are the most basic accommodations offered by colleges and universities?

Most post-secondary schools provide students with LD with the minimum three accommodations: extra time on tests, testing in a quiet location, and access to a note taker. However, the logistics of how these accommodations are provided varies widely among schools. For example, at some colleges, students can take tests in a testing center with oversight by a proctor; whereas, at other colleges it is the professor's responsibility to oversee testing accommodations. At some schools, note

takers are paid for their service and are, therefore, readily available; whereas, at other schools it is a volunteer position. In that case, if no student steps forward, no note taker is available. Again, inquiries about the implementation of accommodations should be sent directly to the college.

If a student has a language waiver in high school, can he or she also get one in college?

Success in securing a language waiver in college depends on where the child attends college and the types of services offered there. The support services office will review the student's updated psychological evaluation along with the reason(s) for the language waiver from the high school. If a college language waiver is being considered, the parents should inform the evaluator when seeking re-evaluation in case specific tests are required.

Should the student disclose a learning disability during the application process?

Deciding whether or not to disclose an LD is a highly personal choice. Many consultants agree that the value of disclosing depends on the severity of the disability, the comfort level of the parents and student with disclosure, the level of competitiveness of the college of choice, and the presence of any "compelling reason" to disclose. Compelling reasons might include abnormalities in the high-school transcript, such as an absence of foreign language credits, or requiring that the college have a highly specialized LD service program.

On a related note, although it used to be possible for colleges to determine if a student received accommodations based on the standardized test score report, that is no longer the case. Therefore, unless it is specifically disclosed by the student, parent, or a reference offered by the student, there is no way for colleges to know.

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What should a student with a learning disability look for in a college?

Consider the student's individual needs and spend some time researching colleges before deciding on a college. In addition to standard considerations when looking at colleges (for example, in-state or out, scholarships, and tuition), also consider the following:

- **Level of Support:** Does the student need comprehensive LD services or minimal accommodations? Virtually all schools offer some support, but the more comprehensive the services that are being sought, the shorter the list of available schools.
- **Finances:** Many schools charge fees for LD services in addition to tuition. Be sure to check up front so there are no last minute surprises or disappointments.
- **Extracurricular:** Are extracurricular activities, such as playing sports or joining a sorority, important to the student? For many students, these activities are a vital part of their college experience that provide needed structure, accountability, and social support.
- **Class Size:** Many students with LD do better in smaller class sizes where the professors know their names, are available to talk after class, and answer e-mails.
- **Professors:** Who does the teaching? Large schools often staff classes with minimally-experienced graduate students who do not know the content area as well or do not have a wealth of experience to draw upon when teaching students with LD.
- **Housing Options:** Does the student need to live alone due to cognitive, emotional, or social challenges? Many schools do not have this option for freshmen and may require a request for a housing accommodation.
- **Medical Resources:** Is there access to medical care so the student can continue to receive prescription refills or other medical attention as necessary? Students often find it challenging to secure prescriptions, particularly for stimulant medication, in college for a variety of reasons (for example,

they don't have a car to get to the pharmacy, or they don't have a local physician to write prescriptions), and, therefore, they stop taking the medication at the most academically demanding time of their lives. This problem can be avoided with some planning and forethought.

- **Transportation:** Will your student have access to a car? Students with LD often need to leave campus to pick up medications, attend doctor appointments, or join tutoring sessions. Many colleges do not allow first year students to have cars, but exceptions may be made in certain cases.
- **Faculty Attitude:** Are faculty members accepting of students with LD? The faculty's willingness to accommodate students with LD is critical to the student's success.
- **Course Load:** Can a student with LD take fewer hours per term and still be considered full time? This is an important consideration for health insurance and financial aid, which often require full-time enrollment for benefits.
- **Course Training:** Have the counselors or learning specialists who work with students with LD received special training?
- **Graduation Rate:** Are students with LD allowed more time to complete graduation requirements? If they are not taking the same number of courses or credits per term as their peers, students with LD may take longer to graduate.
- **Parent Support:** Is there someone parents can contact if they have concerns during the academic year? College students are considered adults, so many schools have policies in place that prevent parents from accessing information about their children.

Attending college is often seen as a rite of passage for both students and parents. When searching for the right college or university, it is important that you and your child take into account the campus environment, class size, and the type of support services that are offered. One of the most important factors for success in college is identifying the best fit. With advanced

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planning and forethought, a capable student with LD can have a positive college experience and a bright future.

Suggested Readings

Kravets, M., & Wax, I. (2012). *The K& W guide to college programs & services for students with learning disabilities or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder* (11th ed.). New York, NY: Random House.

Marie, R. P., & Law, C. C. (2012). *Find the perfect college for you: 82 exceptional schools that fit your personality and learning style* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: SuperCollege, LLC.

Seghers, L. (Ed.). (2007). *Colleges for students with learning disabilities or AD/HD* (8th ed.). Lawrenceville, NJ: Peterson's Nelnet.

Helpful Websites

ACT disability testing services:

[actstudent.org/ regist/disab](http://actstudent.org/regist/disab)

College Board accommodated testing (SAT and AP testing):

student.collegeboard.org/services-for-students-with-disabilities

Peterson's is a leading provider of education information and advice:

<http://www.petersons.com/>

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