

Accessing College as a Student

Living with a Disability

ECMC is committed to the success of all students, including students living with disabilities. In this changing economy, skills and qualifications obtained through education beyond high school are becoming more important for earning a family-wage job. We have gathered some resources to help guide you through the process of accessing and succeeding in college as a student living with a disability in the United States.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 21% of undergraduate students in the United States are living with a disability¹.

Legal Protection for College Students Living with Disabilities

Two federal legislative acts were passed to protect and support students with disabilities in higher education in the United States. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 prohibit the exclusion and discrimination of anyone within a publicly funded program solely based on their disability. Additionally, the acts require postsecondary institutions to provide reasonable accommodations for students living with physical, learning and/or emotional disabilities. With this protection, you can thrive and achieve your goal of earning a college degree and continuing your education after high school.

Differences Between High School and College

In the United States, high schools are legally required to provide an individualized education plan (IEP) with accommodations for students living with disabilities to ensure students have the

necessary resources and support to be successful in school. This can include outsourcing accommodation needs and changing course and graduation requirements.

Many students with disabilities choose not to register with their college's disability services office right away—often because they hope college will feel different or want to see how things go on their own. Both research and experience show that students who connect early with support services tend to thrive. By registering with your school's disability services office before the semester begins, you give your campus time to set up accommodations, tools and strategies that are already in place when classes start—helping you stay on track from day one. Additionally, colleges are not obligated to incur any undue financial and administrative burden to support your needs and accommodations. If a college cannot provide necessary accommodations, you may ask that your financial aid be adjusted to include the cost of the tools needed to succeed in college.

¹ National Center for Education Statistics. "Fast Facts: Students with Disabilities." Accessed November 5, 2025. <https://nces.ed.gov/fast-facts/display.asp?id=60>.

Definition of Appropriate Academic Adjustments

Academic adjustments are modifications to the school setting and course material as deemed necessary to ensure equal academic opportunity and are determined by the college based on needs. While colleges determine what they are able to provide, you'll need to advocate for what will make it possible for you to be successful. Unlike high school, colleges are not required to lower or substantially modify essential academic requirements or the nature of assignments, programs and activities in ways that would result in an undue financial or administrative burden on the school. In addition, colleges are not required to provide devices and services of a "personal nature."

Examples of appropriate academic adjustments are:

- Reduced course load
- Course substitutions
- Adaptive hardware and software on school computers
- Notetakers
- Recording devices
- Sign language interpreters
- Extended time for testing
- TTY in dorm room (if the college provides dorm room phones)

How to Request Appropriate Academic Adjustments

To request academic adjustments, you must self-report your disability to the appointed office as soon as you register for classes to give the school sufficient time to determine and secure appropriate adjustments. Some adjustments may require a bit of time to secure the appropriate materials and personnel. Reporting your needs early is vital for ensuring adjustments are in place when classes begin. The placement

of this office is not consistent across all colleges. Some examples of places to look would be the ADA Coordinator, Office of Student Affairs or the Office of Academic Affairs.

You'll be asked to provide documentation of your diagnosis. It helps to also provide a list of services and accommodations that have helped you in the past, including a copy of your most recent IEP or 504 plan. Most schools require you to re-certify your disability as an adult with an updated evaluation at your own expense. If this is required, you should schedule and complete an updated evaluation by an appropriate professional, which could be a medical doctor, psychologist or another qualified diagnostician. Many states have government offices that support people with disabilities and may help you to qualify for an evaluation at no cost.

Additional Resources

Once classes start, you may find the academic adjustments provided are not helpful, or not helpful enough. If this happens, you should contact the office that determined the academic adjustments and request alternatives as soon as possible. Don't wait until the end of the semester to report that the adjustments are insufficient as by then it might be too late for you to succeed in your classes.

If you believe your request for alternative adjustments is not addressed appropriately, contact your school's ADA Coordinator or file a grievance with the college's ombudsman or appointed personnel to ensure you receive appropriate academic support.

For more information on accessing college as a student living with a disability, visit the following:

- National Center for College Students with Disabilities: <https://nccsd.ici.umn.edu>
- DREAM: Disability Rights, Education, Activism and Mentoring: www.dreamcollegedisability.org

- AHEAD: Association on Higher Education and Disability: www.ahead.org/home
- U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights "Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities": www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html
- U.S. Department of State: Education USA's "Resources For Students With Disabilities": <https://educationusa.state.gov/resources-students-disabilities>
- National Center for Learning Disabilities' Young Adult Leadership Council: <https://nclcd.org/join-the-movement/yalc>

Need More Information?

The College Place is here to help you with free college-planning resources and personal advice. Visit our website at www.ecmc.org/TCP.