

---

# TRANSITIONING FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE: A PRIMER FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

*by Mariclare O'Neal, M.Ed. Candidate at Rivier College, Nashua, New Hampshire, May 2011*

Making the transition from high school to college marks the start of a period of new beginnings as students progress to life at college, complete with increased independence and freedom. The opportunity to live away from home and be responsible for day-to-day life decisions is a big step toward their impending adulthood. However, for students with disabilities this transition is especially significant as it marks the beginning of two noteworthy changes: the move from school-initiated and parental advocacy for their educational rights to self-advocacy, and a change in the law protecting their legal rights.

Fortunately for these students their college's office of Student Disabilities Services (SDS) provides resources and accommodations for them at the college level. Though the name of this office will vary from school to school, (for example, the Offices of Disability Services or the Office of Special Services) the goal of providing accommodations for disabled students remains the same. Though most colleges will have such an office, if they do not, there will be a member of the administration designated to handle student disability issues. Upon providing proper documentation and registering with SDS, students may be granted accommodations similar to those received in high school.

Though the governing law changes from high school to college, there are still legal protections in place to provide students with equal access to the educational programs offered at their college. Once a student has graduated from high school, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) no longer covers their Special Education rights; instead the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) and Section 504 (E) of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 protect their rights as a person with a disability. As long as a college accepts federal funding (most do), they are legally required to provide *equal access* to their educational programs to qualified students who have disabilities. Such equal access allows all students to fully participate in all educational and related programs offered. An important point to be aware of, though, is that while colleges are bound to provide reasonable accommodations, they are under no obligation to redesign their academic programs. Instead, equal access will be provided to the existing programs.

One of the most significant changes from high school to college is the requirement that students must now self-identify as a student with a disability. This is a change from K-12 where the school identified the disability as required by IDEA. Even if a student has disclosed their disability on their college application, the school is under no legal obligation to refer students with disabilities to SDS. Instead, it is up to the student to contact and register with SDS at their chosen college. If, however, a student self-identifies to a faculty or staff member, that person is required to refer the student to SDS.

Another difference from high school to postsecondary pertains to the role of parents and their involvement with advocacy for their children. As the students are considered adults by law, they must advocate for themselves instead of their parents advocating for them as occurred in K-12. While

parents are welcome to join their child during the initial meeting with Student Disability Services, under FERPA (the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act) students at the college and university level are considered adults, complete with privacy and confidentiality protections. By law, college staff cannot talk to parents about a student's academic progress, as was common practice up through high school. This law pertains to all students, whether or not they have a learning disability.

If students would like their parents to become involved with the SDS, they may sign a release authorizing the SDS staff to speak to parents and release information to them regarding their child. However, even with a signed release, the student still has the responsibility to advocate for himself and/or to make the necessary decisions regarding his education. No one in the college administration, including the SDS, will check with parents to make sure that they have endorsed the student's decisions. Even with a release, the law considers college students to be adults able to act on their own behalf.

By providing the necessary comprehensive documentation and registering with SDS, students will be able to receive reasonable accommodations for their disability. The documentation must be less than three years old and must confirm the disability and the resultant limitations. This three-year standard is used so that the testing adequately represents the current adult measure of one's functioning. If a student's documentation is not up-to-date, the SDS will require that new testing be done before any accommodations may be granted. While the college may provide students with a list of examiners, it does not provide testing services. Further, it is the student's responsibility to pay for any required testing and evaluation.

Some physical disabilities, such as blindness, may not require documentation, as the impairment is obvious. However, for those with less obvious disabilities such as learning disabilities, psychological disabilities or chronic health problems, documentation will be required. Depending on the disability, documentation may come from a medical doctor (chronic health issue, physical impairment), a neuropsych exam (autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities), or a psychologist or psychiatrist (psychological disorder). It is important to note that Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 plans are NOT considered sufficient documentation upon which to provide accommodations. It is the testing supporting these plans that allows the granting of accommodations. During a student's senior year of high school, it is in their best interest to make sure that all necessary testing is up to date to ensure that the SDS registration process flows smoothly and that their accommodations are available to them at the start of their college classes.

The documentation must also verify the need for accommodations and include suggested accommodations that would benefit the student. Depending on the diagnosis and test results of each individual student such accommodations may include assistive technology, extra time for tests, distraction free environment for testing, note-takers, assistance with time-management and organizational skills, and more. Accommodations may also include ensuring classrooms, bathrooms, and dorms are handicap accessible as needed.

One frequently asked question by students with disabilities is whether they must disclose their disability on their college applications. When applying to college, a student is under no obligation to disclose that they have a disability. Whether it's in the student's best interest or not is a case-by-case decision. For instance, if a student has a Mathematics Disorder and has low grades in math due to this, it might be worthwhile to disclose the disability so the college has a better understanding of why the grades are low. The college cannot base their decision to accept or deny on the presence of a disability. Doing so would violate a student's civil rights.

Once a student has chosen the college he or she will be attending, he/she should get in touch with Student Disabilities Services and set up an appointment to review their documentation so as to ensure that registration will be completed and accommodations in place at the start of their first semester. If accommodations for placement testing required by your college will be needed, the student must contact SDS prior to the testing to ensure those accommodations are provided. Registering with the SDS allows students to access beneficial and important support services. By utilizing the services offered, students will increase their self-advocacy skills and become better prepared for their journey toward a successful college career.

## REFERENCES

- Heath Resource Center. (2006, February). *Guidance and career counselors' toolkit* [Resource Guide]. Retrieved from The George Washington University HEATH Resource Center website: [www.heath.gwu.edu/assets/33/toolkit.pdf](http://www.heath.gwu.edu/assets/33/toolkit.pdf).
- Horowitz, S. H. (2008, February 1). *Planning for postsecondary transition*. Retrieved from National Center for Learning Disabilities website: [www.nclد.org/college-aamp-work/post-high-school-options/transitioning-to-college](http://www.nclد.org/college-aamp-work/post-high-school-options/transitioning-to-college).
- Leuchovius, D. (2003). *ADA Q&A...the ADA, section 504 & postsecondary education* [Information Sheet]. Retrieved from Pacer Center website: [www.pacer.org/parent/php/PHP-c51g.pdf](http://www.pacer.org/parent/php/PHP-c51g.pdf).
- Lewis, C. (n.d.). *Making the transition from high school to college for students with disabilities* [Fact Sheet]. Retrieved from National Center for Learning Disabilities website: [www.nclد.org/images/stories/Publications/Forms-Checklists-Flyers-Handouts/checklist-transitioningfromhs-college.pdf](http://www.nclد.org/images/stories/Publications/Forms-Checklists-Flyers-Handouts/checklist-transitioningfromhs-college.pdf).
- Sharma, C. (n.d.). *The transition from high school to college: Changes in legal rights and responsibilities* [Brochure]. Office of Disability Services, University of Massachusetts Lowell.