

GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS, PARENTS, AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AS THEY CONSIDER POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Introduction

Disability Services, or Access Services, in higher education exists as a center for disability education and resources for students, staff, and faculty. For the purpose of this document, we will use the term Disability Services (DS), though this department may be called Access Services, Accessibility Resources, Disability Center or something similar. The professionals in DS Offices are happy to help students navigate the landscape of higher education as well as locate necessary services. They are invested in student **access** and helping students develop the skills necessary to become an effective adult learner.

A gap in what students need to know and do as they matriculate from high school to colleges/universities has been identified by higher education disability educators in Washington State. Quite often, students are unable to name their disability(ies) due to the effect of their disability and, subsequently, are unable to articulate the barriers they experience in a learning environment. While disability service professionals are able to coach students through this process, these fundamental skills will greatly benefit the student in accessing appropriate accommodations in postsecondary education. This guide serves to bridge this gap so students, their parents/guardians, and high school staff understand the rigors of higher education and the self-direction required for all students, including students with disabilities.

Background and Context

[Gear Up](#), a publication created by the Washington Student Achievement Council ([WSAC](#)), does a good job of providing a broad overview of the function of DS Offices in Postsecondary education.

Postsecondary Disability Student Services

*Campus **disability services offices** ensure equal access to educational programs and services by providing consultation on accommodations (placement testing, classroom, assistive technology, and more) for students with disabilities who are otherwise qualified for college. Postsecondary institutions refer to their disability offices in different ways; however, the most common title is "Disability Services (DS) Office."*

Because IDEA no longer covers students who have graduated from high school, the rights of students with disabilities are different in college from what they were in high school. Unlike high school, postsecondary

*institutions are not required to provide FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education). Rather, postsecondary institutions are required to provide appropriate academic adjustments as necessary to ensure that it does not discriminate on the basis of disability. In addition, **if** a postsecondary school provides housing to nondisabled students; it must provide comparable, convenient, and accessible housing to students with disabilities at the same cost.*

*While colleges are required to provide accommodations that allow students **equal access** to the curriculum (e.g. taking a test in a quiet room or having a sign-language interpreter); they are not required to provide special educational services, therapies or curriculum modifications that fundamentally alter the nature of the program or class. However, colleges and universities routinely offer some services to all students that may be beneficial to some students with disabilities, including tutoring, personal counseling, writing coaching, health and wellness programs, study skills, and time management training.*

It is important for high school students and their parents to plan appropriately for their students' transitions to postsecondary institutions. Compared to services at public K-12 schools, the services provided by postsecondary institutions may seem minimal. To be eligible for disability related services in college, students must have a disability as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

*The DS office will work closely with students to help them understand their rights. Some of those rights are covered by the **Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)** (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99). Please be aware that the DS Office will be unable to discuss a specific student's circumstances or record with anyone (including parents or guardians) without that student's express permission.
Source: 2014-15 Higher Education and Counselor Workshop Book and US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights*

How are accommodations determined in a postsecondary setting?

Each institution will have its own policy concerning what is needed to determine adjustments and accommodations. Students should make sure they are familiar with the policy at the institution they are considering. At most institutions in Washington State, accommodations are determined on a case-by-case basis using a three-pronged approach. They are:

- Student self-report including academic history, accommodations used at previous educational institutions, and description of barriers the student currently experiences in accessing the classroom environment
- Professional judgment of the DS Office staff conducting the initial meeting
- Third-party documentation prepared by a qualified diagnostician trained to diagnose the student's specific disability

At the initial appointment with the DS professional at the college/university, students should be able to name their disability and be prepared to discuss:

- The history of their disability;
- The barriers they experienced in K-12;
- The college/curricular barriers they experience (or may experience) in learning environments due to their disability, and;
- An overview of accommodations they have received in previous institutions of learning.

Appropriate college accommodations will be determined in order to mitigate non-essential systemic barriers (physical/curricular) to the student's education based on the reported disability. If the DS office staff does not have enough information to determine reasonable accommodations, the following may be requested:

- Additional documentation from a qualified diagnostician trained to diagnose the student's specific disability
- A facilitation with the student's instructor(s) in order to make sure accommodations will not impact the course learning outcomes
- Consultation with medical doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, prior educational personnel, and/or other applicable agencies

In order to obtain necessary accommodations and auxiliary aids, postsecondary students with disabilities must identify their need by making a formal request with the DS Office. At its core, the accommodation process is interactive and requires that the student engages with the DS office to ensure their accommodations are appropriately mitigating their barriers. Adjustments to the student's accommodations throughout their time at the institution may be necessary. Each college or university may have a different timeline for accommodation and auxiliary aid requests; students must know the process at their institution and follow through with ample time for the institution to satisfy the

request. An institution may ask for a professional determination of whether requested accommodations or auxiliary aids are necessary for equal access.

Accommodations are intended to level the academic playing field for adult learners with disabilities. Accommodations:

- Do not guarantee success, but instead provide access
- Do not provide specialized instruction that is common within IEPs;
- Do not modify college curriculum;
- Do not replace mastery of course and/or program outcomes, and;
- Are not retroactive

While Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 Plans may provide some useful information when determining college accommodations, students may be asked to obtain more detailed documentation from a qualified diagnostician to support their request for accommodation.

Skills Necessary to Begin College

This is a non-exhaustive list of recommended skills students should have acquired prior to starting college or university. Students who have not mastered these skills tend to struggle with college processes, requirements, and their overall experience as an adult learner.

- **Academic Expectations:**
 - College students must know the attendance policy for each class and adhere to that policy.
 - Course requirements / curriculum are not modified based on a student's disability; all outcomes must be achieved.
 - Self-direction is a basic requirement for attending college (i.e., effective study habits, accessing tutoring when necessary, meeting course expectations, time-management, organizational skills and other executive functioning tasks).
- **Acceptable College Behavior:**
 - All students must abide by the institution's Student Code of Conduct.
 - All students, including students with disabilities, are subject to the conduct process.
 - Accommodations may be requested for equal access to the conduct process.
 - Student behavior, whether intentional or disability-related, must not interrupt the learning environment for any student or instructor.
- **Assistive Technology:**
 - Students who are assistive technologies users must have a working knowledge of their equipment.

NOTE: Many DS Offices do not have the staffing or expertise to deliver this service.

- **Communication Skills:**
 - Students are expected to communicate with faculty and staff in a timely and appropriate manner regarding accommodation and disability-related needs, concerns or questions.
 - Students are expected to check their email regularly, both school and/or personal, depending on the college's official means of communication.
 - Students are expected to read all communications sent by the college thoroughly; if unclear, the student should seek out a college staff member for clarification.
 - Students are expected to follow through on all requests from the college.
- **Digital Literacy:**
 - The college experience is digitally-driven and managed.
 - College students are expected to have a basic understanding of computers and be familiar with their usage.
 - It is important that all adult learners have access to a computer - desktop or laptop - to complete their college work. (Computer labs are available on campus.)
 - **NOTE:** Mobile devices are convenient, but most often do not have the robust capability of full computer set-ups.
 - Basic computer processes, such as composing an email, saving work, and attaching a document are expectations of beginning college students.
- **Self-advocacy:**
 - In college, it is up to the student to use accommodations - or not
 - If a student chooses to use accommodations, they must initiate the interactive process with the DS Office by following each college/university's stated procedure for self-identification.
 - Students are expected to renew their accommodations on a term to term basis - accommodations do not roll over term to term.
 - If using Financial Aid, adult learners are expected to manage their funding sources, including timelines and knowing available resources for learning more about their funding.
- **Self-awareness:**
 - College students should be aware of their strengths and challenges.
 - Students should take intentional steps to decide their desired career path, utilizing Advising/Career Services through the college.
 - Adult learners should be able to name their disability and discuss the barriers they may experience in the college setting.

- Adult learners need to recognize when their goals and their disabilities intersect and when additional conversation is needed with a DS professional.
- College students should be aware of the campus and community resources available that DS Offices do not provide (i.e. personal/crisis counseling, tutoring services, food and housing insecurity resources, and other social service agencies).

Glossary

Access

In education, the term **access** refers to the ways in which higher educational institutions and policies ensure—or at least strive to ensure—that students have equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education.

Accommodation

Reasonable accommodation provides any qualified individual with a disability to access the benefits, rights and privileges of college services, programs, and activities, in the most appropriate integrated setting. Accommodation mitigates barriers that exist in the institution, both physical and curricular; accommodation does not remove essential requirements of a course or program.

Auxiliary Aids & Services

Equipment and services provided by the college to enhance access to college materials, programming, and curriculum. Some auxiliary aids and services include captioning, audio note takers, ASL Interpreters, CART/Speech to Text Services.

FAPE

A free appropriate public education must be available to all children residing in the State between the ages of 3 and 21, inclusive, including children with disabilities

IDEA

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children.

Otherwise Qualified

A student with a disability must be able to meet the same academic requirements and standards as non-disabled students.

Personal Aids and Services

Personal aids and services, including help in bathing, dressing, or other personal care, are not required to be provided by postsecondary institutions under either Section 504 or Title II. Personal attendants and individually prescribed devices are the responsibility of the student who

has a disability and not of the institution.

Success

The ADA requires only that institutions permit students with disabilities proper access to postsecondary education opportunities in a nondiscriminatory manner, but does not promise success in the form of educational gains. Success rests solely on the student meeting all postsecondary educational requirements.

References

- [Washington Council for High School-College Relations: 2014 Fall Counselor Workshop Higher Education Book - A Resource for High School Counselors](#)
- [Office for Civil Rights | U.S. Department of Education](#)
- [Post-Secondary Readiness Rubric User Guide - New York Department of Education](#)
- [Access vs Success: Services for Students with Disabilities in the Postsecondary Education](#), Sassu, K.
- [Higher Education's Obligations Under Section 504 And The American with Disabilities Act](#)
- [Transition of Students with Disabilities to Postsecondary Education: A guide for high school educators](#)