

College Planning for Students with Disabilities

excerpted from *How To Choose a College: Guide for the Student with a Disability*.

How To Choose a College: Guide for the Student with a Disability, Fifth Edition, 1997, was written by the Association on Higher Education and Disability and the HEATH Resource Center of the American Council of Education. The HEATH Resource Center operates the U.S. Department of Education's national clearinghouse on postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities. You can contact the HEATH Resource Center at One Dupont Circle, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20036-1193; (202) 939-9320; (<http://www.ACENET.edu>).

I have a disability. Where should I go to college?

This question is misdirected; it makes the assumption that the decision to attend a particular institution should be based on one's disability. That puts the emphasis on your status as "disabled," rather than on your status as an academically qualified, potentially successful student who happens to have a disability. Do not allow your disability to become the major influence in your life; keep it in proper perspective. If you are to choose an institution where you can be successful and happy, you must consider any disability-related special needs you may have, but those needs are just one part of a much larger list of considerations to be made.

Twenty years ago, a student with a disability would have needed to ask, "Where can I go to school if I have a disability?" At that time, few colleges and universities were

wheelchair accessible, only a limited number were willing and able to provide interpreters, and academic accommodations for students with learning disabilities were unheard of.

Thanks to a series of legal rulings and to many students with disabilities who preceded you through the educational ranks and who set the stage for your participation, accommodations for students with disabilities are relatively commonplace today.

The How, Where, and What of Choosing a College

How do you decide among the many colleges and universities available to you? Your first step in choosing a college is to ask yourself some basic questions about how prepared you are academically and socially for the challenges that college has to offer, where you want to study, and what you want to study. Going to college is a major step in your life. It means achieving new levels of

responsibility and independence. Some high school seniors are more ready than others to manage that independence; disability may or may not have anything to do with preparedness.

Specific Support Services

After you've thought about your goals, you'll be ready to think about your disability-related needs and the support services that may be necessary for you to be successful in college. The first step is to track down someone on each campus you are interested in who can answer the very specific questions you need to ask. Don't assume that the folks in the admission office, or even in the general counseling office, are going to have the information you seek. They may think they know what is available on campus, but the only way you can be sure that what you need will be there when you need it is to talk specifically to the individual(s) who will be providing these support services to you when you arrive on campus.

Most campuses will give you an opportunity to identify yourself as a student with a disability at some point during the admission process. There may be a place to check on the college application or in the information concerning housing, athletic events, and so forth that is sent to you after your acceptance. If the college invites you to identify yourself as a student with a disability and in need of accommodation, it is to your

advantage to respond as quickly and completely as possible. By law, your disability cannot be used to discriminate against you in the admission process.

In high school, the school district is responsible for providing any and all support services you need to encourage your full participation in the educational process. Colleges and universities do not have the same obligation. They are required, by law, to provide any reasonable accommodations necessary for you to have equal access to the educational opportunities and services available to your nondisabled peers if you request the accommodations. Colleges and universities are under no obligation to seek you out to see if there is something you may need.

The people responsible for providing support services to students with disabilities on college campuses have different titles and work out of different offices from campus to campus. Ask for the Office of Disability Services or the Office for Special Needs. If those inquiries do not succeed in helping you find the right person, contact the college's 504 Compliance Officer through the college's Affirmative Action Office and ask that individual for a referral to the appropriate office for support services.

Colleges and universities will vary in how much support they provide, but seldom will the level of support equal that which you received in high school. Once you have

identified the individual(s) responsible for support services on the campus, the questions you ask should be very specific and based on the needs you have. Listed below are examples of questions for people with various disabilities. Put together your own list of things to inquire about before you make contact with the individual(s).

Remember, you are free to ask about both the accommodations that you must have and the things that would be nice to have available.

Actually visiting the campus of your choice before planning to attend it is a good idea for all students but should be considered an absolute must for students with mobility impairments. The only way that you can be sure if the degree of accessibility available meets the degree of accessibility you need is to go and see it for yourself. If possible, schedule enough time to eat a meal, sit in on a class, and perhaps stay overnight.

A student who uses a wheelchair might ask:

Are there any buildings on campus that are not wheelchair accessible? Are the campus bookstore, the main library, and the student union wheelchair accessible? How about the counseling center, the sports arena, and health services?

Is there adapted housing available through the residence hall system? What kind of adaptations have been made? Are all of the

public areas of the residence halls wheelchair accessible?

What kind of accommodations for taking tests are available to me if my disability interferes with my ability to write quickly or in small spaces?

I need a personal care assistant to help me in the mornings and evenings. Who is responsible for recruiting, training, and paying for the attendant?

A student with a hearing impairment might ask:

How do I make arrangements for notetakers in my classes? Who does the scheduling? How are notetakers recruited? How are they paid?

Who makes arrangements for interpreters? Are interpreters available for non-classroom activities? Will I get priority (early) registration for classes?

Is there a TT available to me on campus? Can I call your office on my TT if I need a message relayed to a processor on campus?

As noted in the ERIC Digest, College Planning for Students with Learning Disabilities (1989), by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education (ED 314 917), a student with a learning disability might ask:

Who counsels students with learning disabilities during registration, orientation, and course selection?

ACCESS ERIC
2277 Research Blvd.
MS 4M
Rockville, MD 20850

What kind of tutoring is available, and who does it--peers or staff?

800 LET-ERIC
800 538-3742

Can students with learning disabilities take a lighter course load and more time to graduate?

A Final Word

Any important decision cannot be based on a single factor. Thus, to decide on a college solely on the basis of your disability is to do yourself a great disservice. Your abilities, interests, and individuality should be major considerations in choosing a college. There are many quality schools that have solid academic programs and good supportive services. Your task is to plan ahead, ask questions, seek out the information you need, and make a wise choice. A successful choice results from knowing yourself, reviewing your options, and putting it all together in a final selection that is right for you.