

The “Right Fit” Post-High School Experience

For students with an IEP or 504 considering post-high school options, the level of support offered can be an important component. A variety of other factors are also important to finding just-right options, including possible career/major, geographic location, climate, size, social environment, cost, and employment outcomes.

While this guide focuses on college programs, families are encouraged to consider the wide range of post-high school options available to students. Some students are not ready for or interested in the traditional four-year college experience immediately after graduation from high school. Alternative choices include work, apprenticeships, skills-based training programs, post-graduate programs, gap years, and transitional programs.

Typically for post-high school programs resulting in a college degree, students are required to meet general admissions criteria, and student applications are initially evaluated by the admissions office. A student’s disability information is confidential, and it is the family’s decision whether or not to disclose disability information to the college admissions offices during the application process. After being admitted to the college, if seeking accommodations and support, students should be prepared to openly discuss their disability and specific needs with the college’s support services.

Differences Between High School and College Support

Colleges provide accommodations (not modifications) under the *Americans with Disabilities Act* and Section 504 of the *1973 Rehabilitation Act*. Neither act requires post-secondary institutions to provide accommodations to students. In contrast, under the *Individuals With Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), high schools are required to offer services to meet a student’s unique needs.

A student’s accommodations at the college level are based not only on a student’s high school 504 plan or IEP, but on the individual institution’s review of required documentation typically including psychoeducational and/or medical evaluations. The burden rests on the student to self-identify with a disability, provide accurate, updated, and thorough documentation to, and request reasonable accommodations from the college.

Please see the Appendix for a more detailed outline of the differences between high school and college services.

Readiness for a College Experience

Research has consistently shown that without proper preparation and planning, students may experience difficulty when transitioning from high school to college. Once in college, accommodations are tools that students may use; however, without the use of learned strategies, many students struggle. Issues that interfere with success in college may include: poor organizational skills, lack of classroom participation, ineffective coping and academic strategies

(including procrastination), lack of persistence when encountering difficulty, and lack of willingness or knowledge of how to seek help when needed. Qualities such as confidence, perseverance, resilience, self-discipline, awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses, and self-regulation are linked with a successful transition.

To assess readiness for college, students can ask themselves the below questions:

- Why do I want to go to college?
- How prepared am I academically and socially?
- Am I ready to live away from my current support system, including family, friends, school staff, and other supportive people?
- What academic and personal challenges do I face, what skills and strategies can I utilize, and what supports do I anticipate that I will need in college?

Parents/guardians and other adults can increase the odds of a student's success through the transition by encouraging them to develop essential skills while still in high school. Ways in which adults can support students in learning strategies and developing independence include:

- Encourage the student to actively participate in IEP/504 meetings
- Help the student to understand their learning profile, including strengths and weaknesses
- Support the student in developing a list of compensatory strategies
- Cultivate the student's communication skills through encouraging/coaching them to speak for themselves, both written and orally
- Hold the student accountable and let them experience the consequences of their actions
- Involve the student in decision-making at home regarding their schedule, activities, study plans, and chores
- Support the development of life skills including doing laundry, checking email regularly, organizing their backpack and personal space, planning out daily and weekly commitments, and managing money

Consideration of Mental Health Issues

An increasing number of students head to college with an already diagnosed mental health condition. Students may have been in therapy, taken medication, and/or received support services through the high school, private tutors, or other agencies. Planning ahead for a student's ongoing mental health needs is critical to their safety and success. Students need to be ready to manage their mental health care independently and plan for ongoing treatment needs. When assessing fit for post-high school experiences, students and families may consider:

- distance from home
- availability of on-campus counseling services, including cost, number of sessions possible, and experience of staff
- availability of someone who is able to prescribe medication on or near campus
- availability of specialty services for those in need
- emergency services or hospital near campus in case of crisis

After choosing a post-high school experience, students may elect to transfer treatment to providers near campus or have treatment shared between at-home and near-campus providers. The following are steps strongly suggested once a student has selected their post-high school experience:

- disclose disability (if applicable) through the campus disabilities office
- sign releases for new providers to speak with former providers or, in the case of shared treatment, for all providers to communicate with one another
- sign releases for college staff and local providers to be able to contact your parents/guardians if you are having difficulties that put you at risk
- establish a plan to reach out if help is needed
- consider whether to request a single room (if available); living in close quarters while coping with a psychiatric problem may require extra planning
- speak honestly with your doctor about how substance use may affect your condition and medication

Level of Support Needed at the College Level

Outlined below are three levels of support offered on college campuses, varying from basic services to more comprehensive programs. An appendix follows with lists of individual programs with moderate or comprehensive support as well as college programs geared toward students with autism and students in recovery from an addiction.

The anticipated level of support required for an individual student's success may change as the student matures throughout high school. A student's apparent needs as a freshman may be more intensive than those required when they ultimately graduate from high school. When considering the level of support a student requires at the post-secondary level, input from the student's teachers and support staff can be helpful. Specifically, families are encouraged to consider the following:

- Student's level of independence in completing course work both in school and at home (consult with study skills teacher)
- Number of study skills periods provided by the high school
- Number and level of academic courses in the high school schedule
- Amount of modifications provided (e.g., are modified grades used?)
- Student's independent living and self-regulation skills and emotional maturity

Levels of Services Available to Students with Special Needs Seeking a College Degree

Level 1: Least Comprehensive/Minimal Support

- Available at most colleges
- Services are sought after admission to the college
- Self-referral by student
- Accommodations and minimal services provided

Level 2: Moderate Support

- Services are sought after admission to the college
- Self-referral by student
- Well-designed accommodations, extensive services, and/or tutoring with specially trained peer tutors, graduate students, and/or learning specialists
- Student attends as needed; no required attendance

Level 3: Structured/Comprehensive Support

- Student's disability may be given consideration during the admissions process
- Separate application to the structured program often necessary
- Level of selectivity differs from college to college
- Number of students is usually limited
- Proactive, structured, and comprehensive support is offered
- Student progress may be monitored
- Additional cost; often referred to as fee-for-service programs

Questions to Consider When Visiting the Office for Students With Disabilities

- Are there special admission procedures for students with disabilities? Is there a program that requires a separate application?
- What is the student to staff ratio within the office for students with disabilities?
- What specific services are offered for a student with my disability?
- If needed, can students get waivers or course substitutions for certain course requirements like world language?
- If applicable, is assistive technology available?
- What documentation is required in order to be eligible to receive accommodations?
- Are there extra fees for programs or services?

Appendix

Links to Programs With Moderate Support (Level 2)

**Students must be admitted to the college before being considered for services/accommodations.*

[Catholic University DC](#)
[Clark University, MA](#)
[Coastal Carolina University, NC](#)
[Colby Sawyer College, NH](#)
[East Carolina University, NC](#)
[Eastern CT State University](#)
[Eckerd College, FL](#)
[Florida Atlantic University](#)
[Franklin Pierce University, NH](#)
[University of Hartford, CT](#)
[Hartwick College, NY](#)
[High Point University, NC](#)
[Indiana University](#)
[Ithaca College, NY](#)
[Vermont State University](#)
[Johnson & Wales University, RI](#)
[University of Lynchburg, VA](#)
[University of Mary Washington, VA](#)
[McDaniel College, MD](#)
[Menlo College, CA](#)
[Monmouth University, NJ](#)
[New England College, NH](#)
[Northeastern University, MA](#)
[Ohio Wesleyan University](#)
[University of Pittsburgh, PA](#)
[Rider University, NJ](#)
[Rochester Institute of Technology, NY](#) (National Technical Institute for the Deaf)
[Southern CT State University](#)
[Springfield College, MA](#)
[Syracuse University, NY](#)
[Temple University, PA](#)
[Towson University, MD](#)
[University of Massachusetts, Amherst](#)
[University of South Carolina](#)
[University of Vermont](#)
[Western New England University, MA](#)

Links to Structured/Comprehensive Support Programs (Level 3)

[Adelphi University, NY](#)

[American University, DC](#)

[Barry University, FL](#)

[Beacon College, FL](#)

[Concordia Conservatory, NY](#)

[Curry College, MA](#)

[Dean College, MA](#)

[University of Denver, CO](#)

[Fairleigh Dickinson University, NJ](#)

[University of Hartford, CT](#) (If ineligible for 4 yr, admitted to 2 yr program at Hillyer College)

[Hofstra University, NY](#)

[Iona University, NY](#)

[Landmark College, VT](#)

[Lincoln College, IL](#)

[Lynn University, FL](#)

[Manhattanville University, NY](#) (learning support)

[Manhattanville University, NY](#) (neurodiversity support)

[Marist College, NY](#)

[Marshall University, WV](#)

[Marymount Manhattan College, NY](#)

[Mercyhurst University, PA](#)

[Mitchell College, CT](#)

[Muskingum University, OH](#)

[Northeastern University, MA](#)

[Schreiner University, TX](#)

[St. Thomas Aquinas College, NY](#)

[University of Arizona](#)

[University of Connecticut](#)

[West Virginia Wesleyan College, WV](#)

Links to Programs for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

**This list includes programs with a variety of entrance requirements (many fee-based). Students can also consider general comprehensive programs depending on the level of support needed.*

[Adelphi University, NY](#)
[Beacon College, FL](#)
[Centenary University, NJ](#)
[Clemson University, SC](#)
[Dean College, MA](#)
[Daemen University, NY](#)
[Drexel University, PA](#)
[Pennsylvania Western University](#)
[Fairleigh Dickinson University, NJ](#)
[George Mason University, VA](#)
[Hofstra University, NY](#)
[Lynn University, FL](#)
[Manhattanville University, NY](#)
[Marshall University, WV](#)
[Mitchell College, CT](#)
[Mercyhurst University, PA](#)
[Nova Southeastern University, FL](#)
[Pace University, NY](#)
[Rochester Institute of Technology, NY](#)
[University of Delaware, DE](#)
[University of Alabama](#)
[Villa Maria College, NY](#) (Not Autism specific)
[Western Kentucky University](#)

Links to Programs for Student in Recovery from Addiction

[Case Western Reserve University, OH](#)
[Texas Tech University](#)
[Kennesaw State University, GA](#)
[Fairfield University, CT](#)
[Grand Valley State University, MI](#)
[Loyola University, MD](#)
[Rutgers University, NJ](#)
[University of Texas, TX](#)
[University of Vermont, VT](#)
[University of Virginia, VA](#)
[Washington State University, WA](#)
[William Paterson University, NJ](#)

Differences Between High School and College for Students with Disabilities

Applicable Laws

High School	College
IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)	ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Title 11)
Section 504, Rehabilitation Act of 1973	Section 504, Rehabilitation Act of 1973
IDEA is about <i>SUCCESS</i>	ADA is about <i>ACCESS</i>

Required Documentation

High School	College
IEP (Individualized Education Plan) and/or 504 Plan	High school IEP and 504 are not sufficient alone; documentation guidelines specify information needed for each category of disability
Documentation focuses on determining whether a student is eligible for services based on specific disability categories in IDEA.	Student must provide documentation with information on specific functional limitations and demonstrate the need for specific accommodations

Self-Advocacy

High School	College
Student is identified by the school and supported by parents and teachers	Student must self-identify to the disability services office and request accommodations
Primary responsibility for arranging accommodations belongs to the school	Primary responsibility for self-advocacy and arranging accommodations belongs to the student
Teachers approach student if they believe assistance is needed	Professors are usually open and helpful, but most expect student to initiate contact if needed
Classroom teachers will reach out to the student's team (e.g., school counselor, special education teacher, parent) if the student is having difficulty	Students are expected to reach out to professors and staff independently if they are having difficulty

Parental Role

High School	College
Parent has access to student records and can participate in the accommodation process	Parent does not have access to student records without student's written consent

Instruction

High School	College
Teachers may modify curriculum and/or alter curriculum pace of assignments	Professors not required to modify instruction or alter assignment deadlines
Student is expected to read short assignments that are then discussed and often re-taught in class	Student is assigned substantial amounts of reading and writing that may not be directly addressed in class
Student may not need to read anything more than once; listening in class may be enough	Student will need to review class notes, text, and material regularly
Classroom teachers and support staff provide structure for extra help and remind student of assignments and due dates	Students manage time and complete assignments independently; student must refer to syllabus regarding expectations, deadlines, and grading

Assessment

High School	College
IEP or 504 plan may include modifications to test format and/or grading	Grading and test format changes (i.e., multiple choice vs. essay) generally not available; accommodations to how tests are given (extended time, distraction reduced environment) available when supported by disability documentation
Testing is frequent and covers small amounts of material	Tests are typically infrequent and may be cumulative, covering large amounts of material
Makeup tests are often available	Makeup tests are seldom an option; if they are, the student needs to request them

Table adapted from College of St. Scholastica (2011), Institute from Community Inclusion (2004), Opening Doors to Postsecondary Education and Training (2007), University of North Carolina and University of New Hampshire (2011)

Helpful Books and Websites

K & W Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorder, 13th ed., Imy F. Wax and Marybeth Kravets

College Sourcebook for Students with Learning and Developmental Differences, Midge Lipkin
From High School to College, Steps to Success for Students with Disabilities, Elizabeth Hamblet
Seven Steps to College Success: A Pathway for Students with Disabilities, Elizabeth Hamblet

[McLean Student Guide to Mental Health Treatment](#)

[Association on Higher Education and Disabilities](#)

[The Jed Foundation for students with mental health issues](#)

[Think College](#)

[LD Online](#)

[Database of Colleges with Programs for Students with Autism](#)