

# What It Takes to Get Into College If You Have Learning Differences

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Anxiety around college applications is near universal for the nation's high school juniors and seniors, but no two students' experiences are alike. For students with learning differences, the process can be doubly anxiety inducing, and in the age of COVID-19, triply so. For all that anguish, though -- or perhaps because of it -- students with learning differences tend to be more resilient than their typical peers. This resilience, developed over years of having to work harder to succeed within the educational system, can prove invaluable during the college application process. Here, I examine what it takes for students with learning differences to gain admission to a four-year college, with special attention to the additional challenges COVID-19 poses.

## Highlight, Don't Hide, Your Learning Difference

In working with families of students with learning differences, I hear one question over and over: Should we disclose the learning difference on the college application? It's an understandable concern. The general population has many wrongheaded biases that can make applicants wary of mentioning learning differences. This may be why the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) found that only [24 percent of students with learning differences](#) inform their college about their status.

**Experts, though, are nearly universal in their recommendation: it's best to disclose, for three main reasons.**

- First, **learning differences are common**, affecting [one in five students](#). Colleges couldn't afford to stay open without these students.
- Second, **disclosing learning status gives students an opportunity to explain information that might otherwise raise a red flag**, such as high grades but low test scores. Deans at such selective schools as Dickinson College and Yale University [agree](#) that disclosure can be helpful in such situations.
- Finally, **disclosure offers a chance to tell a story of adversity overcome** -- the aforementioned resilience. Students who demonstrate that they've achieved academic success by overcoming the adversity of learning differences show that they're prepared for the rigors of higher education -- a key differentiator in a competitive applicant pool.

**So how should students go about disclosing? General wisdom suggests using the "additional information" section of the common application. This formula can be effective:**

- Educate the admissions team by naming and defining the learning difference.
- Inform them about the impact it's had -- on learning, grades, test scores, etc. -- and how the student has compensated, including any accommodations they've received (IEPs, 504s, test accommodations).
- Impress with results. Describe what the accommodations and adaptations have let the student achieve.

This three-part explanation lets students make the case for themselves as scholars willing to engage in the difficult work necessary to thrive in a demanding academic setting. To ensure this section illustrates resilience, the work of assessing, documenting and accommodating should start long before the college application process.

Starting early offers two benefits: first, it makes a sturdier case for the "overcoming adversity" narrative. Consistent documentation can dispel any fears -- no matter how ill founded -- that a student is attempting to claim disability status to excuse so-so academic credentials. The second benefit is that early, consistent intervention gives students their best possible chance at earning the grades and test scores required for

admission into competitive schools. One popular intervention is the use of accommodations on standardized tests. Determining whether to seek these is an important part of the college application process for students with learning differences.

### **Understand Special Accommodations on Standardized Tests**

Accommodations for the SAT and ACT are designed to adjust the test-taking environment so that it works for students with learning differences, enabling them to “show what they know.” They do not affect the standardization of the tests. Research generally backs their efficacy. In the 1970s and ’80s, educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom showed that learning speed is not an indicator of intelligence and that, with additional time, students who otherwise struggle can achieve at the highest levels. A [research review](#) published more recently comes to a similar conclusion, noting that students with learning differences benefit more than their typical peers when granted additional time. But this finding isn’t universal ([here](#), for example, researchers reached the opposite conclusion), and the existing research is far from exhaustive. Such contradictions are disappointing to those of us who have seen accommodations work well at the individual level, as they undermine the credibility of accommodations overall. Also undermining their credibility: accommodations are not always used as intended. The [2019 Varsity Blues scandal](#) illustrated that the system is open to abuse. That scandal seemed to reify the most damaging myths about learning status and educational accommodations -- among them, that accommodations amount to special treatment. When used as intended, they don’t.

Further, while Varsity Blues may have hurt the public’s perception of test accommodations, it likely did not impact their treatment by admissions teams. That’s because these teams cannot see accommodation status, thanks to a 2003 decision by the College Board (administrator of the SAT) and ACT. ACT’s [recent payment of more than \\$16 million](#) to settle charges that it was improperly disclosing disability status indicates that regulators and watchdogs are serious about keeping accommodation status private.

Ultimately, students and families must decide for themselves whether to apply for accommodations. My take: if they can enable a student with learning differences to better demonstrate their knowledge in a testing environment, there’s no good reason not to. (Here is a [helpful breakdown of how to apply](#).)

The most important takeaway for students and families is this: the SAT or ACT should not be the first time a student tests with accommodations. Just as accommodations throughout a student’s career can better position them to be attractive college applicants, so too can a track record of accommodations illuminate which ones actually help.

Of course, most of what I’ve written so far presumes a “normal” world situation. The COVID-19 pandemic means today’s students are experiencing anything but. This brings me to my next recommendation for students with learning differences planning their college application journey.

### **Be Realistic About the Challenges COVID-19 Poses**

Students with learning differences are experiencing even more disruption this year than their typical peers. A recent [UN report](#) notes that students with disabilities are the least likely to benefit from distance education, in large part because they often [don’t have access to the accommodations and resources](#) they would receive in a physical classroom. What’s more, a highly distracting home learning environment can be particularly detrimental for those with certain differences -- attention deficits, for example.

Another wrinkle: the pandemic has affected the administration of admissions exams. Anecdotally, we’ve heard that students are having trouble registering for their preferred dates and locations and are receiving notice that their registration has been changed after securing it. This means students and parents should be prepared to check and double-check that necessary accommodations are available on test day.

I mention these things not to scare anyone, but to emphasize that this year, students may need to work even harder than usual to overcome the impact of circumstance on their college applications. And while those applications may feel all-important right now, it’s equally important to remember that admission is only the

beginning. Students with learning differences should also consider what it takes to succeed in college. This brings me to my final recommendation.

### **Look Beyond Admission**

For students with learning differences, the college experience is greatly affected by the resources and accommodations their school offers. The data are sobering: compared with their typical peers, students with learning differences take longer to earn degrees and have dropout rates **nearly three times as high**. This is likely because, as research suggests, **most college students with learning differences have limited knowledge of the accommodations their schools provide. Indeed, when college students accept accommodations, their **grades and graduation rates improve significantly**.**

I highly recommend the [K&W guide](#), an 800-page encyclopedia of college resources for students with learning differences. I also encourage parents and guardians to start thinking early in high school about their children's transition to college, with a focus on helping them learn to advocate for themselves.

The good news: students with learning differences can and do regularly gain admission to four-year colleges and universities. As with most other educational accomplishments, though, this group can expect to face more hurdles than their typical peers.

Taking a proactive approach to disclosing learning difference status, preparing for admissions exams and choosing an institution most likely to support long-term success can help ensure positive, rewarding outcomes both during the admissions process and for the duration of students' postsecondary education.