

# Assisting Students with Disabilities in Preparing for College



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One of the great things about college is that all universities across the country welcome and accept students with disabilities into their classrooms, giving them a chance to learn and achieve in an entirely new environment that is more challenging and more engaging. Though this represents a significant amount of opportunity for students with disabilities, it also carries with it a great deal of risk. After all, colleges and universities are not required to identify disabled students and cater to their learning disabilities or other issues. This stands in stark contrast to elementary, middle, and high schools, which work through a series of processes to identify and diagnose learning disabilities and other handicaps.

Because students will largely be on their own, they require a great deal of preparation so that they can capably manage their transition into collegiate life. Indeed, the best education professionals will actually help their students start that transition while they still roam the halls of their high school. By starting this transition early and helping students learn what to expect, where to go, and what to do, they'll stand the best chance at making a successful move into college dorms, college classrooms, and even the upper tier of coursework and accolades.

## **Work On Transforming Students into Advocates for Themselves**

Federal regulations require that primary and secondary schools actively seek to identify students with disabilities, helping to learn more about those disabilities and develop individual education plans that can help disabled students get the most out of their twelve years in elementary and high school. These regulations require all kinds of special accommodations, from separate classrooms and testing environments to mixed classroom instruction opportunities and more. Throughout the process, though, students learn that someone always has their back when it comes to breaking down more complex concepts and providing them with the right tools that they need to internalize advanced material.

This is now how things work in college, as virtually all education professionals know. Though colleges are required not to discriminate against applicants and admitted students based on disabilities, they are not required by federal law to provide the same support system that earlier grades offered to those students. Instead, universities are focused on giving students the opportunities they need to pursue their own support network, their own learning support group, and more.

The key to ensuring a successful transition from high school to college life is for education professionals to teach students the skill of self-advocacy. In just a few short months after graduation, students will be required to take charge and speak to each of their professors about their disability and how that might limit them in class. They may need to strike out on their own to find either a study group or a qualified tutor. Some students may need to negotiate extra time for tests, or extended deadlines on some assignments, as they work through a harder college transformation than some of their peers.

These things are entirely reasonable requests, and virtually all college professors and advisors will both encourage and honor them. Even so, it is up to the student to stand in their truth and be able to discuss their needs with those on campus who can accommodate them. To prepare students for their move into colleges and universities, work with them to develop the confidence and assertiveness needed to manage their own academic success. Encourage them to work in groups, develop skits, or make action plans that will define how they'll address their disability and seek the extra help they need.

When students are confident enough to discuss their disability and make an honest assessment of their academic needs, they'll be more likely to speak up and talk to a professor about those needs. That leads to better grades, a more fulfilling college experience, and a larger network of supportive faculty and students that can suitably replace the student's network of professional educators and special education peers in their high school environment.

### **Teach Students How to Study and Solve Problems on Their Own**

Today's students are served very well by a network of special education teachers, psychologists, and individual education plans, that allow them get extra help when studying for a big test or preparing a big presentation for one of their classes. This help is invaluable, as it helps students fill in the gaps that might exist with their style of learning or their way of acquiring information and putting it to good use. Over time, though, students need to be transitioned away from the hands-on help of school professionals and toward a more independently guided approach that will prepare them for the realities of academia at a college or university.

While high schools fill in the gaps with their own supportive staff and faculty members, colleges do not reciprocate this effort. Instead, students are largely on their own when it comes to doing the necessary reading, any homework assigned to them, and any studying that might be needed for a scheduled test or a surprise quiz. They need to learn these skills in high school, long before they're expected to put them into practice on their own in a postsecondary educational setting.

Education professionals should work with students in the second half of their high school career to determine the best studying habits for each student's needs. Some students may do well to rewrite information, and that strategy can be pursued and refined during their last two years in high school. Others may need flash cards, computer programs, tutors, a study group, or a review of their in-class notes to effectively remember everything they've learned before a test.

By honing a student's unique strengths in studying, and guiding them toward a completely independent method of reviewing class materials and lessons, high school professionals can ensure that they'll be able to use these strategies right away, from day one of their fall semester, avoiding the plight of bad grades and discouraging test performance that could otherwise end their college career earlier than they might have hoped.

## **Vocational Rehabilitation Programs Give Students a Strong Career Footing**

Spend a few moments in any special education classroom, and it's likely that the most common thing discussed between students and teachers is that the class they're studying for has no bearing on their future, no relevance to college, and not even any real relevance to the career that they wish to pursue. This is often a sign of discouragement, but it's just as often a lack of understanding about the real set of skills required for various careers. In many cases, students with disabilities are simply prevented in one way or another from experiencing the working world, and their field of interest, before they head to college to pursue it as their major or minor.

Vocational rehabilitation programs work to prevent this from happening. Their goal is to connect classroom skills with real world experiences and independent living skills, giving students greater perspective when it comes to their career choices and educational pursuits. The program, which operates through a combination of both federal and state aid to school districts, works with students who have learning disabilities, physical handicaps, and other disabilities including a loss of hearing or sight. Programs are designed on a case-by-case basis by a vocational rehabilitation counselor who is specifically assigned to a student.

Together with their vocational rehabilitation counselor, students will get to live through a variety of career and life experiences that will give them greater understanding of what it will be like to venture out into the "real world" after high school, pursuing either higher levels of learning in college, technical training through a vocational school, or a career that doesn't require attending college beforehand.

All the while, the program is setup to both accommodate and challenge the student's disabilities. The goal of rehabilitation is not necessarily to rehabilitate a disability, which in many cases simply isn't possible. Instead, the program's goal is to minimize how severely that disability limits a student's experiences, prerogatives, or attitudes in terms of postsecondary planning and achievement.

All fifty states operate vocational rehabilitation programs that work through school district offices and independent community organizations. It's worth looking first into a school district's offering of these programs, and then into local organizations that often work collaboratively with students and their teachers while offering the service on either an ongoing basis or for a pre-determined amount of time.

### **Beyond Vocational Rehabilitation: Engage in a Career and Skills Assessment**

Many students with a learning disability and even those with a physical disability, often underestimate their potential or never bother to consider how their skills and interests could play out in terms of college majors and eventual careers. This is a sign of flagging confidence, in many cases, but it's one that can be quickly fixed with a career and skills assessment. These assessments are taken numerous times by those high school students without a disability, as their classes and electives require them to devote serious thought to their areas of expertise and how they'd eventually like to turn those things into a successful career.

Assessments like these also help to give students direction, whether or not they're dealing with a disability of any kind. Students with both learning and physical disabilities can benefit from these tests by enjoying a boost in confidence, clarity of direction, and a plan of action as it concerns their future. Better yet, these tests will help give their support staff and

teachers a better framework with which to teach and support them. This will help students be far more prepared for college and an eventual career after they have graduated from high school.

Whether it's the Army's ASVAB system of assessment or numerous online, independent websites, these assessments can help distill a student's strengths and weakness much more clearly and concisely than even most school administrators and teachers can. They take only a few moments, but they could lead to years of better teaching and mentoring for disabled students after the assessment.

### **Make Sure Students Understand the Availability and Role of Assistive Technology**

Years of industry research have yielded a wide array of assistive technology options that can work with both learning disabilities and physical disabilities that might be holding students back from reaching their full, independent potential outside of the high school classroom setting. Assistive technology includes everything from computer programs that teach advanced concepts more visually, to hearing aids and large print projectors that work for students whose disabilities seriously challenge their eyesight or hearing.

Assistive technology is most likely already in use for the vast majority of students, since today's individual education plans are required by federal regulations to consider assistive technology as a key alternative teaching tool when working with learning disabilities or other student handicaps. Even so, many students may not realize that these technologies are assistive in any way and, even if they do, they may not know where to go to enjoy the benefits of such technologies once they've set foot on a college campus.



Be sure that students understand how these technologies are helping them hear better, read more easily, or internalize advanced concepts in a more robust way. Discuss the best ways to use the technology, and make sure that students know where it's available to them on a college campus. Whether it requires a visit to the college's library, a stop by its computer lab and tech center, or another location, the continuous availability of assistive learning tools and technologies will allow students to more easily transition into college coursework without feeling as though they have no way to internalize concepts. It also minimizes the amount of change between a college classroom and its familiar high school predecessor.

### **Help Students Choose Colleges and Make the Right Contacts to Deal with Their Disability**

Though colleges and universities are not required to provide the wide array of assistive services to disabled students that high schools and primary schools are required to provide, they still must be compliant with federal nondiscrimination laws. Essentially, this means that they must at least provide points of contact for disabled students as well as services that can help link them with the right tools, professors, classes, and majors that appeal to their unique learning styles, their physical limitations, or anything else that their disability inherently impairs. Some colleges and universities do this better than others, and that's why it's a good idea for school administrators and special education teachers to help students focus on schools that are friendlier to disabled applicants.

Additionally, special education teachers owe it to their students to help them contact these individuals and discuss their disability in detail. Parents, too, should be involved, and it might be a good idea to arrange for a meeting between the student and their parent, the student's special education teacher, and the disability contact at a student's chosen college. By setting up such a meeting, the student can more easily understand if the college is going to meet their personal and academic needs.

This meeting is as comforting as it is informative, giving students and their parents the reassurance they need during what is certain to be a challenging time. Schools will go out of their way to make sure that disabled students are fully accommodated, and parents will be able to rest a bit easier when they know that their son or daughter is applying to an institution that has the right technologies and classes to serve them well.

Furthermore, meeting with the disability contact is the first opportunity for the student to practice their self-advocacy skills. Teachers should let the student do much of the talking, discussing their past experiences, as well as what they believe their needs are in a college classroom. This is good practice for professors, but it's also a good way to ensure that the student has the vocabulary needed to accurately convey the nature of their disability and how it impacts their classroom learning and attendance, their testing skills, and their ability to study and internalize classroom materials.

### **Prepare Extensive Documentation Regarding the Student's Disability**

One of the best tools to assist student self-advocacy, as well as discussions with college administrators who deal primarily with student disabilities, is for a special education teacher to extensively document the student's performance and their disability. This might include a copy of individual education plans developed during the student's time in high school, as well as any career assessments, vocational rehabilitation program information, and information gathered from the student's teachers during their time in high school. Documenting the student's performance is the best way for professional special education teachers to directly pass on their own unique tools and approaches to those at the university level.

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This documentation also serves as a really great way to fill in any gaps the student might leave as they explain their disability, their performance, and their needs, to the school's disability staff and each of their professors. Furthermore, it serves as evidence that certain technologies and routines do help the student learn, and it helps the school identify ways for the student to apply those methods to their current academic environment.

Any prepared documentation should be discussed with the student when it is handed over. Special education teachers often enjoy a special connection with those they help, and they're in a unique position to explain to the student why the documentation is important, what it contains, and how it can be used to bolster the student's position in college classrooms. When students understand exactly what they're capable of, how they learn, and why they require some forms of special assistance, they'll be better suited to request the accommodations they need from faculty members and disability staff.

## **Proper College Preparation Requires Time, and is Not a Last-Minute Process**

The most important thing to remember about preparing students with disabilities for their college careers is that the process must begin in earnest long before the prospect of graduation looms in the distance. The independent living skills, and the ability to use confidence in self-advocacy, can sometimes take multiple years to develop. This is especially true in students that have used their disability as a reason to give up on themselves, assuming that they'll never has what it takes to assert their needs and acquire higher education.

Begin the process no later than the beginning of the student's eleventh grade year. As with all special education programs, be sure to start slow and to fully explain why students are learning these skills and where they'll eventually lead once students have mastered them. Disabled students often require a deep clarity of purpose and an understanding of the eventual outcome in order to keep their focus on new skills and prioritize them appropriately.

## **An Exciting Time for Families, Students, and Teachers**

Teachers take great pride in turning their young students into confident young adults, and that's exactly what special education teachers are doing when they teach their students how to talk confidently about their needs, seek the right contacts on campus, and pursue vocational rehabilitation that will help them think of their disability in an entirely new light.

By involving students, parents, special education professions, and vocational rehabilitation counselors in the effort, it's possible to create a supportive team that will cover every aspect of the student's needs. This approach also ensures that no potential learning tool, special consideration, or personal reservation is left to work to the students' disadvantage. All told, a special focus on disability awareness and confidence will create a successful college environment where students will learn to function on their own in both an academic and real-world capacity. Students will acquire the skills they need to pursue careers in a field that interests them, all at their own pace and with their own set of high-tech, custom-developed tools and procedures.

**Ready to learn more? Check out:**

**[“Helping Students with Disabilities Prepare for College”](#)**

**OnDemand Webinar**

**[Learn More](#)**

This OnDemand Webinar is intended to provide attendees with information to assist them to help students and families of students with disabilities transition from high school to college or other postsecondary programs. You will learn: What information about a student’s performance should or can be shared with the new school and when to share it, how to coach parents through this transition, and common issues students with disabilities have when transitioning to a postsecondary program, as illustrated by case studies. You will also learn how to assist students with securing accommodations on admissions and placement tests.

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