

# From High School to College

## Navigating Beyond IEPs and 504 Plans

The transition from high school to college marks a pivotal milestone for young adults, especially those with disabilities. While K-12 education supports these individuals through Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 plans, entering higher education introduces a significant shift. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 now provide the framework for ensuring equal access to education and accommodations. This handout is designed to empower young adults and their families with crucial knowledge and strategies for effective self-advocacy and securing the necessary accommodations in the collegiate environment. It is vital for parents and young adults to understand that IEPs and 504 plans from the K-12 setting are not utilized in college.

## Understanding Legal Changes

In K-12 settings, IEPs and 504 plans offer tailored support and accommodations to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities. However, as these young adults transition to college, the support system evolves. The ADA and Section 504 still protect their rights to accommodations, but the approach and responsibilities change dramatically. The transition requires understanding that IEPs and 504 plans, pivotal in K-12 education for providing specific accommodations and supports, do not carry over to the postsecondary education setting. Instead, the protections under Section 504 and the ADA remain in place, yet the method for implementing accommodations shifts to self-advocacy and direct communication with college disability services.

## K-12 to Postsecondary Education: A Closer Look

### K-12 Education

- Schools actively identify students with disabilities through "Child Find" and develop IEPs or 504 Plans to ensure they receive necessary support.
- The responsibility for accommodations primarily rests with the school, with teachers and staff working to implement these supports.
- Parents play a significant role in the development and monitoring of their child's accommodations.

## Postsecondary Education

- Young adults must self-identify to the disability services office to request accommodations, marking a significant shift towards independence and self-advocacy.
- It is crucial for families to understand that the structured accommodations from IEPs and 504 Plans in K-12 do not transfer to college. Instead, accommodations in college are based on self-disclosed needs and documentation provided by the student.
- Students are responsible for providing documentation that meets the institution's criteria, demonstrating the impact of their disability.
- The process of securing accommodations involves direct interaction with the disability services office. Unlike in K-12, accommodations are determined based on the provided documentation without the use of IEPs or 504 Plans.
- The responsibility for managing accommodations shifts to the student, including the need to communicate with professors about their accommodations.
- The role of parents changes significantly, with students considered adults responsible for their own advocacy. FERPA limits parental access to educational records without explicit consent.

## Steps for a Smooth Transition

For a smooth transition from high school to college, taking proactive steps is essential. One of the initial actions for students is to self-identify to their college's disability services office. This step is crucial as it involves understanding the specific documentation requirements, which often differ from those in high school. Making early contact with the disability services office is highly recommended. This ensures that all necessary accommodations are in place well before the semester begins, facilitating a smoother start to college life.

Understanding the legal framework that governs accommodations in higher education is also crucial for students and their families. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act provide critical protections, ensuring the right to access and accommodations for students with disabilities. However, it's important to note that colleges are not required to proactively identify students with disabilities. This reality places a greater emphasis on the importance of self-advocacy, underscoring the need for students to be well-informed about their rights and how to assert them effectively.

Preparation and research are indispensable components of navigating the transition to college. Students are encouraged to thoroughly investigate the disability services and accommodations their chosen institution offers. Engaging early with the disability services office facilitates a productive dialogue regarding the accommodations needed and the documentation required to support these requests. This preparatory step is vital for ensuring that the necessary supports are available from the start, allowing students to fully participate in their educational experience.

Another significant shift from the K-12 education system is the need for direct communication with professors regarding accommodations. Unlike in high school, college professors are not automatically notified of a student's disability or the accommodations they require. This responsibility falls squarely on the student, who must take the initiative to inform each professor about their disability and discuss the implementation of their accommodations. This step is crucial for establishing a supportive classroom environment and ensuring that accommodations are effectively provided.

Finally, building a support network within the college environment is of paramount importance. Disability-specific organizations and peer groups on campus offer valuable support, advocacy, and a sense of belonging. These groups serve as essential resources for students, providing a platform for sharing experiences, navigating challenges, and advocating for systemic improvements. The support network plays a critical role in enhancing the college experience, offering both practical assistance and emotional support to students as they navigate their academic journey.

## Navigating College Life

Empowerment through self-advocacy is a theme that runs throughout the transition to college, becoming the cornerstone of a successful academic journey for students with disabilities. Active participation in the accommodation process, regular communication with the disability services office and professors, and utilization of campus resources such as tutoring, counseling, and assistive technology services are all strategies that contribute to success. Furthermore, engaging in student life activities, including clubs and organizations, can enhance social integration and provide a richer college experience. Learning to manage time effectively and developing strong study skills are also critical for navigating the academic demands of college. Additionally, seeking out mentorship opportunities with peers or faculty can offer guidance and support, facilitating a smoother adjustment to college life. These efforts combined pave the way for not only academic achievement but also personal growth and development.

## Conclusion

The shift from high school to college represents a move towards greater independence and self-advocacy for students with disabilities. By understanding their rights, preparing adequately, and engaging with campus resources, students can successfully navigate this transition and thrive in their academic and personal endeavors. This journey is not just about academic success; it's about building the skills and confidence to advocate for oneself in all areas of life.