

# Navigating the College Transition Maze: A Guide for Students With Learning Disabilities

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The transition from high school to college can be a confusing and overwhelming time for students with learning disabilities (LD), their families, and the secondary-level professionals who assist them. In addition to the challenges that all students face when transitioning to college, additional obstacles confront students with LD. Chief among them is the move from the familiar model of special education services at the high school level to very different services at the college level. Not only does the scope of these services change considerably from high school to college, but there can also be a great deal of institutional variation in the way that these services are provided. Additionally, at the college level, significant changes occur in the legal rights of students, and there is a sharp reversal of parental and student responsibility.

As the former director of a university LD program, I frequently worked with students and their families during this transition. The students included high school students who were searching for a college, students who were accepted into the university and were preparing to enroll, and students who had matriculated and were trying to negotiate the first semester of college as a student with LD.

Questions and misconceptions about postsecondary disability services commonly arise during these interactions. At minimum, these misconceptions simply add to the confusion surrounding the college transition process and can be overcome with time and experience in the college setting. At worst, the misconceptions can create false expecta-



tions for families and students in transition, which may ultimately lead to a college experience that is less successful than it might otherwise be. This article presents several of the most common questions and misconceptions related to transition and LD services and is intended to furnish useful information about the process to students with LD, their parents, and the professionals who assist them in the transition process.

***“Are you the special education department? Can you tell me about your special education services?”***

These questions go directly to the heart of the primary difference between high school and college services for students with LD. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, Public Law 105-17, 1997) is the law that

addresses the education of students with LD at the secondary level. It states that special education services are required for students who are not making satisfactory academic progress because of a disability. Students who meet this criterion are entitled to these services, which must be free and individually appropriate for the student and must be based on data from a comprehensive evaluation that is conducted and paid for by the school. The school must develop an individualized education program (IEP) for each student. This document must contain educational goals for the student, objectives for achieving these goals, and specific modifications that must be used to assist the student in reaching these goals. A team consisting of professionals and parents makes the significant decisions related to creating and implementing this document, and the school must ensure that the student is making satisfactory progress.

In stark contrast, no similar special education system exists at the postsecondary level. Rather, at the postsecondary level, disability services are provided. These services are based on two civil rights mandates, Section 504 (P.L. 93-112) of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA; P.L. 101-336). Both statutes prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability and require that postsecondary institutions ensure equal access for otherwise qualified students with disabilities. Equal access includes providing students with reasonable academic adjustments (also called accommodations) and auxiliary aids.

At a minimum, postsecondary institutions are required to offer disability services. Such services are sometimes called *generic* (Brinckerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, 2002) and are made available to all students with disabilities. Section 504 requires that the institution designate an institutional contact person, or “a responsible employee” (104.7(a)), who ensures that qualified students with disabilities receive individually appropriate accommodations (e.g., extended test time, separate exam locations) and auxiliary aids (e.g., access to assistive technology). This person is not required to have training in special education or disabilities and may have other responsibilities on the campus. Institutions may not charge additional fees to students for providing such accommodations.

Institutions can go beyond this minimum level of services and offer a disability program. In these programs, a full-time disability program coordinator or director administers services that exceed the reasonable accommodations discussed previously. Although the exact nature of these programs differs from college to college, they may include varying levels of individualized contacts for students, such as work in learning skills and strategies, instruction in writing strategies, or individualized tutoring (Brinckerhoff et al., 2002). The institution may require that students pay a fee for these more comprehensive programs (although not for reasonable accommodations, as previously noted). Table 1 indicates the range of LD support services that may be available. The disability contact person at each school of interest can offer advice about the exact nature of services available at that school.

Regardless of the model used, institutions are not required to modify admissions standards, course content, or programs of study for a student because of his or her disability. Section 504 and the ADA are civil rights mandates designed to ensure access; they are not special education laws. Any special education services, as well as the modifications outlined in a student’s IEP, end when the student graduates from high school. The student is respon-

sible for self-identifying to the college and for providing appropriate documentation of his or her disability. If the student does not self-disclose, accommodations need not be provided, nor must

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they be provided retroactively to a student who did not self-identify and who then struggled. Grades earned in courses taken before the student’s self-disclosure do not need to be deleted or modified (Madaus & Shaw, 2004). Additionally, a student is only eligible for protections and services if he or she maintains a grade point average (GPA) that the institution or a program within the institution has set and that applies to all students (Heyward, Lawton, & Associates, 1990).

***“My daughter is on a Section 504 plan in high school. We were told that her plan would automatically transfer to your college since you are also covered under Section 504. Is this true?”***

High school students with LD who do not require intensive special education services but who still need reasonable accommodations (such as extended test time) may be placed on a Section 504 plan at the high school level. These plans outline the specific accommodations that must be provided to the student and the personnel responsible for ensuring that the accommodations are provided. Although colleges and universities are obligated by the mandates of Section 504, they are bound to Subpart E of the law, whereas Subpart D covers secondary schools. These subparts place significantly different requirements on secondary schools and post-

secondary institutions. Thus, as with an IEP, the services outlined in a secondary-level Section 504 plan end at graduation from high school. Although colleges may use these plans in decision making, they are not obligated to follow the requirements of these plans. Madaus and Shaw (2004) presents a detailed examination of the differences between Subparts D and E and the implications for students in transition.

A newer, but increasingly common, problem at the postsecondary level relates to two groups of students in transition. One group consists of students who were not diagnosed with LD but who exhibited difficulty at the secondary level in a specific area, such as test taking. The second group consists of students who no longer meet the diagnostic criteria for a learning disability but who are provided with a monitoring plan. Instead of using special education services, secondary teams may create Section 504 plans for these students. Sympathetic teachers may give the student informal accommodations, such as extended time to complete a test or a quiz. Students may become reliant on these accommodations and may expect these services to continue at the college level. Without documentation that verifies the existence of a learning disability and a subsequent substantial limitation to learning, postsecondary institutions may deny the student’s accommodation request. Thus, regardless of how well-intended such informal accommodations may be, secondary school personnel and parents should carefully consider the long-term impact of these accommodations and their ramifications for the student.

***“Can you tell me about the admissions process for students with special needs?”***

As noted previously, postsecondary institutions are not required to modify admission requirements for applicants with disabilities. For an applicant to be admitted, the institution must consider him or her “otherwise qualified” despite the existence of a disability. According to Section 504, a qualified person at the postsecondary level is one “who meets the academic and technical standards

**Table 1. Continuum of Support Services**

Decentralized Services	Loosely Coordinated Services	Centrally Coordinated Services	Data-Based or Comprehensive Support Programs
Formal contact person	Formal contact person	Full-time program coordinator	Full-time program director
Limited support services	Generic support services and accommodations available	Services housed in disability office	Assistant director or coordinator
Few established policies	Peer tutors available	Accommodations provided	Full range of accommodations
Students dependent on sympathetic faculty	Students referred to other on-campus resources	Established policies and procedures	Established policies and procedures
		Emphasis on student self-advocacy	Emphasis on student self-advocacy
		Adaptive technology may be available	Adaptive technology available
		Specially trained disability specialists may be available	Trained disability specialists available
			Individualized support available
			Individualized support plans developed

*Note.* From “Resource Guide of Support Services for Students With Learning Disabilities in Connecticut Colleges and Universities,” by J. M. McGuire and S. F. Shaw, 1989, Storrs, CT: A. J. Pappanikou Center on Special Education and Rehabilitation: A University Affiliated Program, University of Connecticut. Copyright 1996 (revised) by Joan McGuire and Stan Shaw. Adapted with permission.

requisite to admission or participation in the recipient’s education program or activity” (104.3 (k)(3)). In other words, the student must participate in the standard admissions process and must have academic credentials that are equivalent to those of his or her peers without disabilities. The institution may consider the impact of the disability when making the admission decision, but doing so is not required.

If a particular college does not allow for formal self-disclosure on the application or if it does not consider specific documentation during the admissions process, applicants might consider including information about the LD in their personal statement or in a supplemental personal statement. Students might describe how the LD affected a particular area of coursework, why no

foreign language courses appear on the student’s transcript, how the LD contributed to lower standardized test scores, or what methods or techniques were developed to compensate for the LD. Although this disclosure will not guarantee the student admission, it may give an admissions committee supplemental information that might help explain inconsistencies in the application (e.g., between grades and standardized test scores) and help the committee make decisions about students who are marginal for admission to a particular institution. Of course, it is critical that the student be comfortable with this self-disclosure and that the statement be carefully and thoughtfully prepared.

Focusing almost solely on the admissions requirements of an institution—such as required high school GPA, SAT,

or ACT scores and number of years of foreign language study is natural. However, considering factors that will affect a student’s ability to succeed at and eventually graduate from an institution is also vital. Such factors include the following:

- Will the student need to take certain levels of math or statistics?
- Will the student be required to take a foreign language?
- Will the student be expected to write at a certain level?
- What types of courses are required for specific majors?

A possibility exists that an institution may accept a student but the student may then find particular graduation requirements to be unexpected and seemingly impossible to complete. Because special education services do

not exist at the postsecondary level and the school will not modify courses, specific admission requirements to an institution are important, but they represent only one part of the total transition picture.

***“We have been told that our daughter must self-identify as a student with a disability and we must submit documentation as part of the admissions process.”***

Although colleges are not allowed to consider the impact of an LD in the admissions process, some colleges may have a parallel admissions process for applicants with LD. In these cases, the schools require that an applicant with LD submit documentation and an application simultaneously. The student may be accepted into both the institution and a comprehensive support program for students with LD. As previously noted, these comprehensive programs may also charge an additional fee for services.

However, two critical points are related to these procedures. First, self-disclosure of a disability during the admissions process must be voluntary. Colleges may not make preadmission inquiries regarding disability status and may not require that the student self-disclose, unless the student wants to participate in the institution’s formal support program. Second, an applicant who is admissible under the standard admissions criteria used by the institution must be accepted regardless of the disability. The institution cannot require that the applicant submit documentation as part of a standard admissions process. If admitted, the institution cannot require the student to use and pay for a comprehensive support program. Additionally, the student must receive appropriate accommodations at no cost, regardless of whether he or she chooses to participate in the program.

Conversely, if the student is not admissible under the standard application process but might be admissible under a cooperative review, the institution may request documentation of the disability and use it in the cooperative review. In such cases, if the institution offers the student admission, it may be considered conditional, and the student

may then be required to participate in and pay for a comprehensive support program.

***“Can you tell me about the admissions process for your program?”***

At most institutions, the process to determine eligibility for protection under Section 504 and the ADA is not an admissions process for disability services. As previously discussed, a student is who is accepted into the institution and who desires disability services must submit documentation to the disability service office. If this documentation meets the institution’s requirements, the student may be eligible for such services as reasonable accommodations and auxiliary aids. The institution bases decisions related to specific accommodation requests on the results

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of this documentation and the intersection with the requirements and assessment methods used in each course.

***“When we apply to your institution...”***

Parents often speak for a student with LD who is in the transition process. In fact, rarely does a college disability service provider interact directly with secondary students about postsecondary services; typically, the student’s parent makes these calls. Additionally, during meetings and interviews with families, the parent often refers to the student with an encompassing “we” or refers to him or her in the third person. The parent might not include the student in the conversation, even when he or she is sitting in the room. In other cases, a parent completes an admitted student’s forms related to LD services.

Although such practices are well-intended, they stifle the development of self-determination and independence, which are critical skills for success in college and beyond. Students then often arrive on campus unable to describe their disability and unable to speak for themselves about their need for accommodations. Parents and school staff should teach students about their LD at an early age, and they should encourage students, when it is age-appropriate, to speak and make decisions for themselves. These lifetime skills must be developed and continually nurtured.

***“My child is a 504” or “My child is classified...”***

Related to the previous discussion, parents and students should consider the use of person-first language. A student, in person-first terms, is no longer a “disabled child” but is a “student with a disability.” The disability is a part, not the whole, of the student. The student also has an entire profile of strengths. This perspective requires people (including the student) to view the student as a person with unique strengths and needs, and it may serve as a foundation upon which self-determination and independence can be developed.

***“My daughter is eligible for services at your school because you are a public institution and I am a taxpayer in this state.”***

A common misconception relates to the requirements that Section 504 and the ADA impose on public and private institutions.

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Both laws apply equally to any institution, public or private, that benefits from any form of federal financial assistance. This assistance may include student financial aid, research grants, or construction grants. If any part of the institution receives such assistance, the



## Useful Transition Resources

- **The HEATH Resource Center**

The HEATH Resource Center is the National Clearinghouse on Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Disabilities. Resource papers, an extensive resource directory, and useful fact sheets are available at <http://www.heath.gwu.edu>. Available publications include *Creating Options: Financial Aid for Students With Disabilities 2003*, *Assistive Technology for Students With Learning Disabilities*, and *Students With Learning Disabilities in Postsecondary Education*. Contact The HEATH Resource Center, George Washington University, 2121 K Street NW, Suite 220, Washington, DC 20037; telephone: 1-800-544-3284; Web site: <http://www.heath.gwu.edu>

- **U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights**

The U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights Web site ([www.ed.gov/ocr](http://www.ed.gov/ocr)) offers valuable information for students in transition. Included on the site are reports and resources, including *Students With Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities* (July 2002). This publication presents answers to a series of common questions related to the rights and responsibilities of students with disabilities in postsecondary education.

- **Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction**

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (<http://www.dpi.state.wi.us>) offers *Opening Doors to Postsecondary Education and Training: Planning for Life After High School* (September 2003). This handbook for students, school counselors, teachers, and parents includes such sections as "Planning and Preparing for Postsecondary Education," "Timeline for Planning," and "High School: What Classes Must I Take?" The handbook also contains a "Postsecondary Education Exploration Worksheet" and an appendix of documentation guidelines. The handbook is available at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/een/pdf/tranopndrs.pdf>

entire institution is covered under Section 504 and the ADA, regardless of whether the institution is public or private.

An applicant must be otherwise qualified for admission, regardless of his or her disability. If admitted, the student must submit documentation that verifies the specific nature of the disability. The institution must base decisions related to services and specific accommodations on the intersection of this documentation and the essential requirements of a specific course or program of study. The fact that an institution is public or private, or that a student's parent is a state taxpayer, has no bearing on these decisions.

***"My child had these services in high school and will need them in college to be successful."***

Although special education laws require that secondary schools ensure that students with disabilities are successful within their academic program, Section 504 and the ADA are civil rights laws that are based on ensuring that the student has an equal opportunity for access. They are outcome-neutral and do not mandate equal opportunity for success (Madaus & Shaw, 2004).

Because special education services and IEP mandates end at high school graduation, some requested services and accommodations might be available at the college level whereas others may not. These decisions are based on the intersection of the student's disability and the essential requirements of a

course or a program of study, and they do not consider whether the student will be successful. For example, parents and students may request a tutor or a teacher to reteach or explain course material in a different way. Some high school students may have exam questions rephrased or modified. Although high schools might furnish these services, they are not likely to be considered reasonable at the postsecondary level under Section 504 or the ADA.

An additional area of confusion often arises in relation to course substitutions. Students who receive waivers of secondary graduation requirements in such areas as mathematics or foreign languages may expect that such waivers will automatically carry over to the postsecondary level. However, these waivers may not carry over; and in fact, if the student's program of study is such that mathematics or foreign language study is an essential requirement (e.g., mathematics for a nursing major, foreign language for an international business major), the school does not need to allow that the requirement be substituted. Furthermore, providing such modifications at the high school level may actually restrict the admissions eligibility of a student to some institutions. Madaus (2003) explores in greater detail issues related to course substitutions.

## Final Thoughts

Attending college is an important and attainable goal for many students with disabilities. However, significant differences occur in the ways that services are furnished at the secondary and postsecondary levels. The information in this article is intended to provide students and families in the transition process—as well as the secondary school professionals who work with them—important and useful information. Additional resources regarding the



**Attending college is an important and attainable goal for many students with disabilities**



transition process appear in the box entitled "Useful Transition Resources." Understanding these differences and allowing the student to be an active participant in the decision-making process are vital to promoting successful transition.

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