



## CLIP AND SAVE

# NAVIGATING COLLEGE DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES

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Making the transition from high school to college can be overwhelming for students with disabilities. Navigating differences between federal disability legislation governing secondary and post-secondary education, changes in the nature and scope of services provided for students with disabilities entering higher education, and misconception and misinformation about the nature of post-secondary disability services can add obstacles for students seeking to make a smooth transition. Adding to the confusion are the wide institutional variances among college disability support services (DSS).

The old adage “one size fits all” is not true of college disability support services (DSS). The disability support services available at colleges and universities range from minimal to extensive. Identifying a good match between student and level of support is more important than identifying a “good” college disability support program. Disability support services are effective only to the degree to which they meet the individual student’s needs.

### WHY SUCH VARIATION IN THE LEVELS OF COLLEGE DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES?

This question speaks directly to the most significant difference between secondary and post-secondary disability services – that is the differences in disability legislation governing K-12 and higher education. Students enrolled in secondary schools receive accommodations under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Students enrolled in post-secondary environments receive accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. These statutes have very different but complementary objectives. The most important difference, as it relates to a post-secondary environment, is

that Section 504 and the ADA are intended to establish a “level playing field”—usually by eliminating barriers that exclude persons with disabilities. In stark contrast, the IDEA is remedial in nature, often requiring the provision of programs and services designed to maximize or even guarantee success. The IDEA is a special education statute that does not apply to colleges and universities. There is no “special ed” in college and institutions are not required to do whatever is necessary to guarantee success—only to provide equal access. Most students and parents do not understand this difference and believe that students with disabilities in college are provided with the same procedural safeguards they had in K-12.



At a bare minimum, colleges and universities are required to provide assistance that may help lessen the impact of a student’s disability on academics and campus life. Typical accommodations may include, but are not necessarily limited to the following: note-taking assistance, Braille materials, sign-language interpreters, adaptive technology devices, test accommodations, and physical barrier removal.

Neither the ADA nor Section 504 requires post-secondary institutions to provide extensive supports that are considered to be of a personal nature or supports that will substantially and fundamentally alter the nature of academic programs and activities. As such, specialized and professional tutors, modified curricula and exams, waivers of academic standards and admission criteria, and assistance with learning and compensatory strategies are not required under the ADA and 504 and may not be provided by many institutions.

### SO WHAT ARE THE CONTINUUM OF SUPPORT SERVICES AVAILABLE?

Generally, college disability support services can be classified into one of three categories: minimal services, structured services, and comprehensive programs. Each will vary in the nature and intensity of the support offered, the professional training and expertise of its staff, and the fees associated with the service.

*Minimal Services:* Minimal services offer the least comprehensive support of the three categories. The primary focus of a minimal service delivery model is to meet the intent of the law. While there is often no formalized disability service office, there is generally a formal contact person available to “troubleshoot” disability-related needs for college students with disabilities. However, that person may not have training in special education, learning disabilities, or other disabilities and may very well hold other responsibilities on campus. In short, assisting students with disabilities may not be their first prioritized focus. The accommodations provided are often generic and limited in scope. Very little budgetary support is available beyond the minimal requirements of the law. Accommodations typically provided may include note-taking assistance, extra time on exams, Braille materials, sign-language interpreters, peer tutors, and text in alternative

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### *Navigating College, Continued.*

format (electronic text, books on tape, enlarged print). Adaptive technology may be virtually nonexistent. Under a minimal service delivery model there is no charge for services as they are legally required by federal statute. However, there may be no formalized policies and procedures for accessing those services and no formal mechanism for ensuring that a student is receiving what he or she needs. Students seeking accommodations under a minimal service delivery model must be astute at self-advocacy.

*Who Benefits:* Students who utilized some accommodations in high school, are good self-advocates and will only need occasional assistance in college may benefit from a minimal service delivery model.

*Structured Services:* Structured Services are designed to provide assistance for students with disabilities that embraces the spirit of the law not just the letter of the law. These services are provided in a formalized disability support service (DSS) office and there are formalized policies and procedures for obtaining them. In addition to a full-time coordinator or director, other specially trained disability specialists are often available. A structured services delivery model will generally have an identified budget available to meet students' accommodation needs, and will engage in monitoring activities to ensure that the services and accommodations provided are effective. In addition to providing the typical accommodations found under a minimal service approach, structured services may also include monitoring of student progress, one-on-one individualized attention from professional staff, feedback and recommendation to the admissions office regarding admission decisions, and abundant self-advocacy on behalf of the student. There is typically close collaboration between the DSS office and other campus resources (counseling center, tutoring labs, writing center) and referrals to such offices will often occur.

*Who Benefits:* Students who utilized some accommodations in high school, students who will need consistent accommodations in college, and students who need help being

self-directed or their own self-advocate may benefit from a structured services delivery model. The structured services approach will work well for the great majority of students with disabilities who are in need of assistance.

*Comprehensive Program:* With the comprehensive program model, students can expect to receive everything available under the structured services approach with an explicit emphasis on maximizing student success. Colleges and universities offering a comprehensive program may have a separate procedure for admission into the program. The comprehensive program will likely have professional staff who are highly trained in the area of disabilities and provide specialized and trained tutors as opposed to peer tutors, compensatory and remedial assistance, study skills strategies for test-taking, note-taking, and time management, and individual success coaching in the areas of self-advocacy and rights and

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responsibilities. These types of services are considered personal in nature and therefore, are not mandated by the ADA or Section 504. Since these services are not legally required and the human resources associated with them can be quite costly, fees are often associated with receiving assistance from a comprehensive program model.

*Who Benefits:* Students who need a highly structured approach to attacking their academics, students who relied on intense K-12 assistance in developing and applying learning strategies, and students who need substantial one-on-one guidance may benefit from a comprehensive service delivery model.

### **EVALUATING THE DSS OFFICE**

While general overview information can be obtained through the Internet using either a specific college website or a website that is designed to provide information on a number of colleges, in-depth research is needed to determine exactly which service delivery model a DSS office subscribes to. A word of caution—never take the college's public relations materials at face value. Some may claim to provide comprehensive services, but in actuality the services may only meet the minimal requirements of the law. Visit the DSS office during your college tour, talk to students with disabilities about their experiences, and ask the DSS staff to categorize their services as minimal, structured, or comprehensive. The DSS office should be able to articulate a rationale behind its program philosophy. Additionally, find out what local high schools are "feeders" into the institution and talk with these high schools' guidance and counseling staff about their view of the level of support the DSS office provides. Finding the correct level of support for students with disabilities requires making informed decisions based on information gathered from a number of resources. Actively exploring the full landscape of service provisions before making an enrollment commitment is key to a successful college transition for students with disabilities.

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