

Special Needs Accommodations for College Students

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We've talked the about the legal rights of students in the public school system with [504 Plans and IEPs \(Individualized Education Plans\)](#). What happens when you graduate, however, and have college in your sights? Are you guarenteed those same accommodations and modifications you had in elementary and secondary school? Are you all alone?

Today we're going to explore what happens to students with special needs in college – where to look for help, how to go about getting it, and ways to supplement your education on your own.



The Americans with Disabilities Act

We're going to quickly revisit the basics of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and then explore what it means for post-secondary students. [ADA.gov](http://ada.gov) says this as an overview of the law:

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) prohibits discrimination and ensures equal opportunity for persons with disabilities in employment, State and local government services, public accommodations, commercial facilities, and transportation. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) prohibits discrimination and ensures equal opportunity for persons with disabilities in employment, State and local government services, public accommodations, commercial facilities, and transportation.

Basically, this law was created to give Americans with disabilities equal opportunity in the world, just as we've created laws that prohibit discrimination based on color or creed. Creating equality for people with disabilities, however, can be a bit more challenging, as needs and abilities differ so much more than color and creed.



According to Title III, Part 36, § 36.102 Application, (a) the Americans with Disabilities Act also applies to any:

Private entity that offers examinations or courses related to applications, licensing, certification, or credentialing for secondary or postsecondary education, professional, or trade purposes.

The [U.S. Department of Education](http://www.ed.gov) says that when it comes to legal requirements, school districts are required to provide their students with an FAPE (Free and Public Education) according to Section 504 of education law. In post-secondary education, students still have rights.

These rights come with more responsibility, however. Post-secondary education isn't guaranteed or required by law, as it is for younger students. Students who choose to go on to post-secondary education are guaranteed, "appropriate academic adjustments as necessary to ensure that it does not discriminate on the basis of disability."

Being in college means being in the grown up world. Sure, you might get to do new, cool things like stay up as late as you want (although you'll regret that around finals), eat whatever you want (or can afford), and join a sorority or fraternity. But it also means you're in charge of taking care of yourself. Once you hit eighteen, your parents lose many of their legal protection rights over you.

In other words, you're in charge of voicing your needs.

So How Do You Get Started?

I'm going to use the guidelines and requirements of my alma mater, UNLV.



This is me, chillin' with our amazing mascot, Hey Reb.

It's a state college, so it's going to be similar to what you find in most colleges. If you're curious to see the university's overview page, here's the [link](#) to UNLV's Disability Resource Center. I would suggest finding the same page for your college or university's website. If all else fails, you can actually call your university's main line, and they'll get you hooked up with the right people.

UNLV's Guidelines from the Disability Resource Center

Step 1: You need to request services

Because college isn't a required level of education, your college won't be receiving your records the way your old schools did. They won't come find you. You need to go to them and ask for help.



At UNLV, the department is called the DRC (Disability Resource Center). If you're not sure where to find that office, do what every desperate college student learns to do: pick up the phone, call the college or university's main number, and start asking questions. It might take you 3-4 transfers, but you'll eventually get there.

Once you get to the office, you'll probably need to request a meeting. To prepare for this meeting, you'll need to know the answers to these types of questions, according to UNLV. They might give you paperwork to fill out as well, so you'll need to talk to someone to understand exactly what it that your university wants. *A word to the wise, if you can, make a copy of everything you fill out. There's always a chance someone will lose it, and having an extra copy is easier than starting over.)*

- What are you able to do?
- What can't you do because of your disability?
- How severely impaired are you when compared to the average person?
- How does it affect how you learn?
- What are your learning strengths?
- How do you learn, study, take exams best?
- What was the date of your last diagnosis for a disability?
- Which academic accommodation(s) do your feel is/are supported by your documentation?
- What would happen if you weren't provided an accommodation(s)?

I would write these down if you think they might help you later on in a meeting or evaluation.

Step 2: You'll need documentation

This is the tricky part. If you've met with a psychologist or other professional recently where you have a What accommodations are actually available to you? (Accommodation requests come after the initial request to be accepted to the program.) UNLV says the best documentation is medical or psychological documentation if it's from within the last 3 years.

If you don't have this documentation but think you'll need it, it's probably a good idea to try and get a meeting with your healthcare provider to get this documentation as far in advance as you can. UNLV suggests explaining to your healthcare provider exactly what you need the paperwork for so it can be written up correctly. Believe me, the healthcare system is often slow, and so is the college paperwork system.

According to UNLV, while educational paperwork from high school might be helpful in narrowing down the type of help you need, it won't count as the official documentation they'll need. Again, this might differ by school.



Step 3: Choosing Your Accommodations



An important fact to understand is that in elementary and secondary school, there are two types of educational change made for students with special needs

- Accommodations – Changes made to the method of presenting the curriculum. There is no change to the actual material, simply the way it's given to the student.
- Modifications – This is where the curriculum itself is actually changed to fit the student's abilities.

In college, there are no modifications, only accommodations. Students are expected to take classes that are on their levels. As hard as it might be to swallow, that's the reason it's such a big deal when someone graduates from college. No matter who you are, college is meant to be hard.

Accommodations are made to give students access to the material they're capable of learning. For example, someone who's deaf might be able to analyze the heck out of Beowulf, but if she can't hear the class discussion, she's not going to get anything out of the lesson she could otherwise perfectly understand. (My husband worked at UNLV as a note taker for a semester for another student in one of his classes.)

Similarly, other accommodations might include separate testing facilities, extended testing periods, or special technology. You'll need to work on this with your DRC The important thing is that your accommodations will need to directly link to the disability you're receiving services for. Similarly, accommodations can apply only to the classes that are touched by the disability. If you've got ADHD and you need extended time to take your Algebra final, it doesn't mean you're going to get extra time in your P.E. weight training final.

Step 4: Who Will Be Involved?

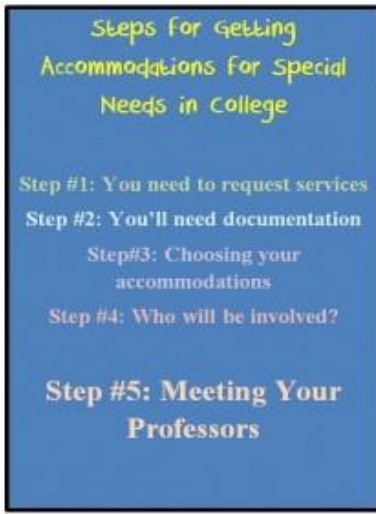
My parents were wonderfully supportive in college. Mom would pack me lunches and force feed me dinner when I was in a comatose state in my bedroom studying. Heck, my parents would even sit on their computers to help me enroll in the next semester's classes if my time slot came up and I was working or in class. But that was pretty much as far as they were allowed to go.

Unless you're a minor, confidentiality laws prohibit parents from being a part of the accommodations process unless you specifically fill out paperwork consenting to let them see your documentation, and then only if the university accepts it.

Again, this is going to be you learning to find your voice. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Sure, it might annoy some people, but this is your college experience, and you shouldn't be afraid to do what you need to do to get everything you can out of it.



Step 5: Meeting Your Professors



When all's said and done, you'll be given what's called (or similar to) an Academic Accommodation Plan (AAP). You'll bring this plan to the professors of the classes that your accommodation touches. UNLV recommends (me, too!) that students with AAPs meet with their professors to go over their modifications if possible before the semester starts.

If your professor refuses to meet your accommodations, you can appeal it with the DRC. Unfortunately, this can take time, but if you really need the modification, push on through.

Some Tips about Post-Secondary Education and Special Needs

- You can often request accommodations for your residence as well if you're staying in a dorm and your disability requires more privacy to study, for example.
- It's becoming more and more common for students not to know who their professors are prior to start dates anymore, as many of them are being simply listed as STAFF. You can still send an email or ask to meet during office hours.
- Remember to build time into everything. I usually don't put things in all caps, but I cannot impress this into new college students enough: DO EVERYTHING AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE!!! Someone somewhere will slow the process, and you want to start the semester with as little stress as possible.
- Keep documentation doubles of everything. There's a monster at each university that slithers around eating paper off of desks and out of filing cabinets.

Ways to Help Yourself, Even if Your Accommodations Request is Denied

Just because you can't get the accommodations, it doesn't mean you can't be successful in college.

- Take a college course on how to study. The class name I'm familiar with is called *ALS – College Success*
- Take only as many classes as you can handle. If you're required to take 12 credits for a scholarship, balance your harder courses with electives.

- Ask the professor if it's alright for you to record her lectures, or ask if there's a way for him to email his Powerpoint to you if you struggle with writing.
- Take the professor up on his office hours for help.
- Check out the Tutoring Center at your campus.
- Utilize the library.
- Find study buddies.
- Stay organized from the beginning.
- Stay focused. (As fun as fraternities seem, they're generally not good for study habits.)
- Do your best to eat healthy and exercise. (And yes, this means not overdoing the alcohol or pizza.)
- Take mental and spiritual breaks. Believe me. When I began to take some time to attend extra Bible studies, go to my small group volleyball games, and just enjoy my family a little more, my brain got some much needed breaks, my grades *didn't* suffer, and I was really encouraged.

College is a new world, and it can be especially hard when you don't have the backup you did in high school. In another way, however, it can be a brand new adventure. It's the time where you learn to stand up for yourself and take charge of your learning experience. The more proactive you are, the better your college experience is going to be.

If you have experience with trying to get special needs services in college, questions, or comments, please share them in the Comment Box below. And don't forget to [sign up for my weekly newsletter](#) to receive extra resources I don't include in my blog, encouragement, and a gift as a thank you for signing up. Thanks for reading!