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ADHD IN COLLEGE

College Accommodations 101: Everything Students and Parents Need to Know

Getting services in college is more complicated than getting them in high school, but it's much more manageable than you think. Here's what you should know (and do) before your teen applies to college.

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There is a lot of confusion about [accommodations for college students with ADHD](#) and learning disabilities. It's important to know how the system differs from the high school system, so that you can prepare your student for a successful transition. Here are some frequently asked questions (and answers) about getting accommodations in college:

Can my child keep her ADHD accommodations when she goes to college? Do they even allow accommodations?

Not only do colleges allow accommodations, but they actually are required to make them for eligible students with disabilities. It's certainly possible that your daughter will get the same accommodations at college that she had in [high school](#). That will depend upon which accommodations she's currently using, and whether they're considered appropriate and reasonable at the college level.

What legal protections are available for students with disabilities?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) applies to everyone, regardless of age, but it's not often talked about in primary and secondary education, in part because kids in kindergarten through high school are protected by two other laws that are more prescriptive: the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Subpart D. Section 504 also covers college students, but it's a different part of the law (Subpart E), which isn't as supportive as IDEA and Subpart D. The ADA isn't as supportive, either.

How do education laws change in college?

IDEA (which governs IEPs) applies only to K-12 students, and their IEPs essentially "expire" as soon as they graduate from high school or age out of the system. This means that, while colleges may choose to provide some or all of the accommodations written into a high-school IEP, they don't have to do so merely because the student used to have those in his plan. Similarly, students with a 504 Plan aren't

guaranteed the same accommodations because their plans (written under Subpart D, which isn't in effect at college) also “expire” when they graduate from high school.

How does an IEP or 504 Plan work before college?

Students in kindergarten through grade 12 are covered by a formal system. Elementary, middle, and high schools have clear-cut responsibilities, including identifying children who may have disabilities, evaluating them, working with parents and teachers to implement appropriate accommodations and services, and providing specialized instruction. For students with IEPs, schools are also expected to assess students' progress toward the goals outlined in their plan and to report on that progress.

[Quiz: How Well Do You Know Special Ed Law?]

How do disability services work in college?

In the college system, students are responsible for themselves. Students seeking accommodations must register with the office responsible for upholding the ADA and Section 504 in college—often known as Disability Services (DS), Office for Access, or something similar—and provide the documentation typically required. Once students have been found eligible for accommodations, someone from that office will coordinate those accommodations, but the office does not play a direct role in students' education in the way students may be used to in high school. DS does not track students' progress, provide specialized instruction, or modify the curriculum. Rather, the department's legal responsibility is to provide accommodations to ensure that students are able to access their courses and materials.

What's the difference between modifications and accommodations?

Accommodations are supports or services that allow students to access the curriculum—they don't change the content taught or any of the expectations for students' performance. Modifications, on the other hand, do exactly that. Common examples of K-12 modifications include a reduction in the amount of work that is assigned or substituting a different type of exam — allowing a student to take an essay exam instead of a multiple-choice exam. Colleges may choose to provide these and other modifications, but they're not legally required to do so — and many do not.

How do laws differ in college?

Colleges are not required to provide an accommodation or modification that would result in a fundamental alteration of their programs. This applies to course requirements, graduation requirements, and the admissions process. If a college requires applicants to have taken three years of a foreign language in order to be admitted, your child is not entitled to an exemption because her high school IEP allowed her to skip a semester of French. The school *can* choose to accept her, but it isn't required to consider her application if she doesn't meet requirements.

Also, colleges don't have to provide any specialized instruction or support, such as access to a learning disabilities specialist. Some schools do offer students appointments with such professionals, but this may be through a special program that charges a fee. Students also aren't “entitled” to any other special tutoring arrangement. If the academic support center only tutors students in a three-to-one student-to-tutor ratio, the college doesn't have to make exceptions and offer one-on-one tutoring for students with disabilities. If the writing center allows students only one appointment a week, those with disabilities aren't “entitled” to more frequent appointments, or to be allowed to schedule appointments when their peers can only access the center on a drop-in basis. However, some schools offer students registered with DS more frequent appointments or the ability to make appointments when others can't.

[Free Resource: The Laws Protecting Students with ADHD]

So will my child get any help?

All of this may sound scary — and you may be worried that your child will flounder without supports. But there are plenty of accommodations that don't alter course or degree requirements — ones that your student may receive, if she registers with DS and is found eligible for them. And remember: Just because colleges aren't required to provide the exact accommodations your child had in high school doesn't mean they won't. This is why it's important for families to do their research before and after applying to a college.

What accommodations can my child get?

There are many accommodations that students will find available at nearly all of the schools that interest them. Some of the most common accommodations include:

- Extended time for exams
- Breaks during exams
- Reduced-distraction sites for exams
- Permission to use a laptop
- Permission to use a spellchecker
- Permission to use a calculator
- Note-taking accommodations (permission to record lectures, to use a laptop, or to access copies of another student's notes)

Spellcheckers or calculators may not be permitted if using them fundamentally alters a course's requirements. For instance, a spellchecker would likely not be allowed in a pharmaceutical course that requires students to know the exact spelling of certain types of medications. However, these adjustments are likely to be available in a lot of classes.

What accommodations will my child likely not get?

Apart from the modifications and specialized help discussed earlier, a common K-12 accommodation that is not usually available in college is extended time for out-of-class assignments. This is because students are typically given at least a week — if not longer — to complete take-home essays or projects. Students who have difficulties managing their time may struggle with this; they should see whether the writing or tutoring center can help them break down their long-term assignments into interim deadlines. Few colleges employ specialists in learning disabilities or ADHD (even at the DS office), but the tutoring center may be staffed with academic coaches who can help students get organized.

How can we prepare before college starts?

Think ahead. Talk with your child's case manager to begin phasing out high school accommodations that won't be available in college. While you do this, make sure that your child learns the skills she needs to succeed without those accommodations. If your child depends on extended time for assignments, work with school officials to improve her time-management skills, so that she learns to complete her assignments in the time allotted.

How can my child access college accommodations?

When your child gets to college, he will need to locate the office or person in charge of disability accommodations. He will likely need to fill out a form (it may be online) that asks him to list the accommodations he's requesting, and also to describe his disability and how it affects him. Every student must provide documentation of his or her disability; in most cases, an evaluation completed during high

school will suffice. Finally, some schools (but not all) will require the student to attend an intake meeting with a Disability Services staffer. That's it!

When your student has been approved, he'll likely receive a Letter of Accommodations (LOA) or Email of Accommodations (EOA). (Some schools inform professors through their learning management system.) In most cases in which notification involves a letter or email, it's the student's responsibility to share this LOA/EOA with his professors.

What should students who want accommodations in college do?

- 1. Prepare a list of accommodations she wants to request in college,** explaining exactly why each one is appropriate based on her specific symptoms of ADHD. She won't hand the list to anyone; it serves as a reference when she fills out her DS registration form and has to say which accommodations she wants and why she needs them.
- 2. Ask for every accommodation she would like to have.** Just because colleges don't have to provide an accommodation doesn't mean they won't. Students should request any accommodation they feel is needed. The college may or may not approve it, but nothing is lost by asking.
- 3. Register with the disability office immediately after college enrollment as an "insurance policy."** (Your child can do this as soon as she submits the enrollment deposit; she doesn't have to wait until she arrives on campus.) Many students with ADHD or LD don't ask for accommodations in college because they're embarrassed, or feel that they no longer need them. Your child may do OK without them, but it's best to register with the Disability Services office anyway. If accommodations are granted, they will be available to him, but he is not obligated to use them. If, on the other hand, he doesn't register — but then later decides he needs accommodations for an upcoming exam — he runs the risk of not getting them in time, since the registration process can take several weeks. Also, while a student can register at any time, he doesn't get to retake exams he already took without accommodations (there are no "do-overs"). Registering doesn't cost anything, and may save your child some headaches in the long run.

Knowing what to expect, families can start preparing their students now for a smooth transition. Be sure that your plan involves building your child's skills, so that she is ready to face the new environment at college. And ask about accommodations and academic supports while looking at colleges, so that you know what she can expect.

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