

Understanding accommodations to support students with disabilities

The number of college students with disabilities has increased over the past ten years, with disabled students making up 21% of college students according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#). While not all of these students might utilize accommodations, it's essential for anyone who works with college students to understand the unique perspectives experienced by disabled students.

Disability basics

A *disability* is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, according to the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (ADA). The ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 are federal civil rights legislation that prohibit discrimination of people with disabilities. These laws set minimum standards for physical access, such as auto-openers on doors or elevators, and they require accommodations for disabled people in public places, [at work](#), or [at school](#). Disabilities might be present from birth or acquired throughout a person's life. A disability might be obvious or less obvious, and some disabilities fluctuate over time. In general, disabilities fall into broad categories like physical/mobility, psychological, sensory, learning, developmental, and medical/health.

Accommodations are adjustments or services that mitigate disability-related barriers. These accommodations might focus on academics (such as extended time for exams, testing in a quieter environment, or accessible textbooks and classroom materials), housing (like residence hall rooms with roll-in showers or a single room), or campus navigation (such as accessible parking or access to a campus shuttle). The offices that assist students with getting and using accommodations go by many names, but they typically are called disability or accessibility services. The [Campus Disability Resource Database](#) has contact information for almost every college or university disability resource office in the United States.

Getting accommodations in college

Unlike K-12 schools, [getting accommodations in college](#) starts with the student identifying themselves to the disability resource office on their campus. Each student's accommodations are determined on a case-by-case basis through an interactive process that involves a student narrative and analysis by the disability advisor. Students typically meet with a disability advisor to discuss their disability and which accommodations would be beneficial. In many cases, documentation of the student's disability is also necessary to supplement the student's narrative. Documentation might include the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan from high school, diagnostic assessment information, or a summary of the disability and its impact from the treatment provider.

After meeting with a disability advisor and providing the requested information, students are able to use the accommodations assigned to them. It is the student's responsibility to communicate these accommodations to their instructors through an accommodation letter. Some colleges and universities use an online portal where students can request their letters electronically, and other institutions use a printed letter that students deliver to their instructors. Students should provide this notification every semester for every class where they want to utilize accommodations.

Supporting students with disabilities

Even with accommodations in place, students with disabilities face unique challenges while in college. Academic advisors, counselors, professors, student affairs staff, and others play a crucial role in supporting disabled students as they navigate college.

Understand disability resources on your campus. Because the process for getting accommodations in college is driven by the student, the process can be overwhelming. For some students, this is the first time they have been involved in their accommodations. Others may not have had a disability before coming to college or have never used accommodations. An educated referral from a trusted source on campus can make the process feel less intimidating. If a student mentions having a disability or a diagnosis that might need accommodations, assist the student in finding the disability resource office and let them know what the process might look like on your campus.

Don't be afraid of the word "disability." Students may not be used to utilizing the word "disability" to describe their diagnosis, and even those with life-long conditions may not be accustomed to describing their disability or their accommodation needs without their parents' involvement. Understanding their disability is a crucial part of a student's identity development, even if students do not embrace the word "disability." The word "disability" carries stigma that can complicate if and how a student builds disability into their identity, but [using the word in a neutral way](#) can reduce that stigma. Disability identity is one of [many identities](#) students might develop and strengthen during college.

Help students sift through "disability stuff" and "college stuff." All college students experience growth and self-discovery as they live and learn in a different environment. Disabled students are no different, though they also have an added element of disability to complicate their experience. It can be difficult to know if struggling in a class or stressing over an exam is a typical part of college life or a sign that they need different accommodations or support because of a disability. Normalizing the ebbs and flows of college life can help students keep a healthy perspective while helping students identify what additional support they need when they need it.

Learn more about how disability impacts students in your field and across campus. [The National Center for College Students with Disabilities](#) provides a [comprehensive list](#) of resources for higher education administrators and staff who want to learn more about college students with

disabilities. The best resource to learn more about college students with disabilities is students themselves. When a student is willing to share their experiences, listen with empathy and an open mind.