National Center for Learning Disabilities
The power to hope, to learn, and to succeed.

Parent Advocacy Brief

Transition to College: Strategic Planning to Ensure Success for Students With Learning Disabilities

Transition is one of the many areas that the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) impacts. Originally passed in 1975, IDEA is the federal special education law that guides policy at the state and local level. Congress reauthorized IDEA on December 3, 2004 and the final regulations are expected in fall 2006.

Congress made substantial changes to the law to increase opportunities for more students to graduate with a regular diploma and then make the successful transition to college. For students with learning disabilities (LD) who want to go to college, it is imperative that strategic planning take place as early as possible.

This brief can help you understand the requirements and opportunities included in the law so that you can successfully plan and help your child prepare for his or her future.

Planning for the Future

Making plans for the future and knowing where you're going allows you to design the steps that will take you to your destination. As a parent, it is important to encourage your child to learn what he or she needs to know about college in order to plan a successful transition.

Despite its forward-looking purpose, IDEA has no jurisdiction after a student exits the K-12 school system. Colleges and universities work under a different set of rules – the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 Subpart E of the Rehabilitation Act.

The primary purpose of IDEA is "to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for **further education**, employment, and independent living" [20 USC 33 § 1400 d 1 (A)]

The Process Is Different

One important difference when comparing IDEA to the ADA and Section 504 is that IDEA has more procedural requirements. For example, IDEA regulations establish timelines for student evaluations, specify who must participate, and outline the dispute resolution process in a way that shapes state, district and school rules. The ADA and Section 504 do not. This means that there is more variation in how the rules are implemented from college to college because these laws are less prescriptive and do not dictate any one way to be implemented. Because each college establishes its own procedures based on its interpretation of the ADA and Section 504, descriptions of what to expect at colleges are based on what is typical of most colleges – which means that it is important to check with each college about its policies and expectations. As part of the planning process, guidance can be sought from a high school counselor or other school personnel on how to gather and understand this information from colleges. This activity can be incorporated into a student's transition plan under IDEA.

Student Rights Are Different

Under the ADA and Section 504, the rights guaranteed to individuals with disabilities are also different. IDEA entitles students to "a free and appropriate public education" through the provision of accommodations such as extended time on tests or books on tape; educational services such as tutoring or assistance with study skills; educationally related services such as speech or occupational therapy; and modifications to curriculum such as shorter testing, more frequent testing or waiving certain requirements depending on the student's disability-related needs.

The ADA and Section 504 offer equal access to existing programs and services through nondiscrimination and reasonable accommodations. Nondiscrimination on the basis of disability is similar to not discriminating based on race or gender, which means making decisions (e.g. admissions, grading, advising, etc.) based on facts instead of on assumptions about a student's disability.

Reasonable accommodations are modifications to policy, practice, instructional delivery, and the environment. These modifications include the provision of auxiliary aids such as assistive computer software or books on tape. Modifications that fundamentally alter the nature of the program, course or evaluation of a student's performance are not considered reasonable and are not required.

Most colleges offer a range of educational support services including tutoring, personal counseling, writing centers, career counseling, wellness programs, and workshops in personal budget management, study skills, stress management and time management. These programs are offered to all students through academic departments, residence life services and student services offices. Disability services offices will likely encourage students to take advantage of these college-wide offerings. Disability services offices may offer specialized advising or counseling, study skills training and other services, but these are not required by the ADA or 504. The legal mandate is to ensure all of the support programs offered by the university are accessible to all students, including those with disabilities.

Did you Know?

- 23% of students with LD participate in a 2-yr college (Source: NLTS2,2005)
- 11% of students with LD participate in a 4-yr college (Source: NLTS2,2005)
- 38.7% of students with learning disabilities drop out of high school. (Source: 25th Annual Report to Congress, U.S. Department of Education)

Student Responsibilities Are Different

At college, students are expected to register with the disability services office and provide documentation (paperwork that supports any requested accommodations). The disability services office will assist students in disclosing their learning disabilities to individual instructors, but students are in control and must initiate the process. As with all college students, students with learning disabilities gradually assume control and responsibility for disclosing and advocating for their own needs. In addition to being responsible for time management, laundry, and choosing course schedules, students with learning disabilities will be expected to schedule their accommodated tests with the office, provide reading lists if they are using books in digital or audio formats and inform instructors of their accommodation needs.

While the general shift in responsibility may be more complicated, this discussion will focus on the initial transition task of registering with the disabilities services office. Central to this task is providing documentation and identifying needed accommodations.

Documentation Requirements for Accommodations in College

From 1977 through the 1980s, public schools, the major admissions test programs (American College Testing Corporation's ACT and the College Board's SAT), and most colleges had very similar requirements for documenting learning disabilities and related needs. These requirements were based on the language that had existed in IDEA since it was first passed in 1975. The significant change made by IDEA 2004 – to eliminate the requirement for schools to determine that a student shows a "severe discrepancy" between intellectual ability and academic achievement in order to be identified as having a specific learning disability – is having a dramatic impact on the documentation policies of the major testing companies. The companies continue to look for an original diagnosis or evaluation that includes a traditional psycho-educational battery of tests, but they now allow for the testing to be up to five years old. The College Board has a process through which the student's high school can supplement older testing with teacher observations on the student's use of accommodations in the classroom. For more information on these requirements, visit

American College Testing (ACT)
http://www.act.org/aap/disab/

The College Board (SAT)
http://www.collegeboard.com/ssd/student/

Colleges are beginning to respond to the changes in the field as well. Many are still requiring a formal battery of tests to document a learning disability, but have moved away from requiring the tests to be less than three to five years old. Some colleges may allow older testing administered when the student was much younger if it is supplemented by file reviews. Many colleges require adult-normed evaluations (tests that compare student to adults in the general population rather than to children). For example, the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale can be used instead of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children. This substitution gives the individual with LD a test score that relates directly to the ADA's definition of a disability.

The Association on Higher Education And Disability (AHEAD) – the professional association for disability service providers at the college level – released a position paper in December 2005 on the best documentation practices in higher education. The position paper encourages its members to develop policies that allow a flexible approach to reviewing documentation of accommodation needs for individuals with LD. AHEAD's paper identifies seven critical elements in documentation (see box on page 3) that can be provided through:

- The results of a psycho-educational battery of tests
- A written narrative of classroom observation
- A student's description of his or her needs
- A combination of these approaches.

How IDEA 2004 Impacts the Transition to College

The rest of this brief will focus on elements that have a direct connection to the immediate issues of transition: documenting needed accommodations and connecting to services.

Evaluations

One of the changes in IDEA 2004 that has already been mentioned is that schools are no longer bound to use a discrepancy model to identify specific learning disabilities. Previously, a discrepancy between aptitude and achievement was IDEA's definition of LD. This required the use of psycho-educational testing. IDEA 2004 allows other approaches that are not dependent on this type of testing. Schools can now use a student's response to valid interventions as part of the initial evaluation process. Schools are not required to move away from the discrepancy model when identifying students with learning disabilities, but many will. Some schools will continue to rely on psycho-educational tests, while others will rely more heavily on specific tests of cognitive processes like attention and memory. Many schools are embracing and implementing more instruction and student data driven approaches and combining Response-to-Intervention (RTI) with file reviews . This will increase the variety of academic tests, progress monitoring data and other elements included in students' records. For more information on RTI, see NCLD's Parent Advocacy Brief, A Parent's Guide to Response-to-Intervention available at http://www.LD.org/ParentBriefs.

There are a number of problems with the discrepancy model, but one advantage was that all LD evaluations used the same core testing and evaluation process. This made it relatively easy for colleges to understand the evaluation process and interpret the test results and documentation for students from almost any school system.

When alternative methods for identification of LD are used, you will want to make sure that information on the evaluation method and approach is preserved so the college has a context for understanding the decisions made by the evaluation and IEP teams. For example, if RTI is used, you will need to include descriptions of the interventions, why they were chosen, and how they differed from the typical teaching or classroom testing environment. Copies of the evaluation team's and/or evaluator's narrative – not just the results – should be included as part of the documentation.

"For students with learning disabilities, the disability services, documentation policies and academic supports offered by colleges are important, but students who have excellent support services and accommodations but "hate" their campus are just as likely to leave as other students unhappy with their choice. Students should be encouraged first to pick colleges they want to attend based on location, general offerings and student life – and then, narrow down the list based on admissions standards and available services and disability supports."

— L. Scott Lissner

Reevaluations

Reevaluations must include a review of existing data such as previous evaluations, outside evaluations, input from parents, classroom-based assessments and observations by teachers and providers of related services. Reevaluations, which have to be conducted at least once every three years (unless a parent agrees in writing with the school not to conduct one), may consist entirely of a review of existing data.

Preserving a description of the process used to document the disability is important. The important questions to address are:
- What student data was reviewed?
- How does the student's performance demonstrate the continued impact of the disability?
- Who conducted the evaluation?

The IEP

The IEP is a critically important document – it is your contract with the school. However, most IEPs do not contain a great deal of useful information for transition planning and will not serve as more than supplementary documentation for a college. However, one of IDEA 2004's goals was to align more closely with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). As part of this effort, IEPs must describe the accommodations needed to participate in NCLB-mandated district-wide testing. IEPs can create a clear history of the testing accommodations that the student needs. As this student-centered record is created, ask that descriptions of the tests (formats, length, standard timing, etc.) be included in the student file in order to make the nature of the accommodations clear. Similar information could be included when discussing accommodations for classroom testing.

The Transition IEP

IDEA 2004 changes the age when a student's IEP must address transition – from age 14 to 16. For a student with learning disabilities who plans on attending college, course selection and accommodations should be considered early, and both should reflect the student's educational goals, even if not as a formal transition plan. If you have not already done so, this is a good time to extend ADA style accommodations (such as assistive technologies and extended testing time) beyond district-wide assessments and into the classroom.

Because students at age 14 begin to be eligible for the adult-normed versions of psycho-educational tests that most colleges require, this is a time to request new or supplemental testing. Remember, the evaluation process is required to identify the student's current educational needs, but not to provide documentation for colleges. When asking for adult-normed tests to supplement the reevaluation, focus on how it can help determine the amount of extra time needed as an accommodation, or on what type of screen-reading technologies might be helpful as the student moves through high school.

The Transition IEP must be updated each year and include "appropriate measurable post-secondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills." With college as the ultimate transition goal and with your child as part of the IEP team, together you can start to identify measurable annual goals, such as collecting information on individual college requirements and services and developing your child's ability to describe the impact of his or her disability along with how and when accommodations are helpful. This self-understanding and skill are the foundation for self-advocacy and will smooth the initial transition process into college. Once you have established transition goals in the IEP, the next step is to identify the transition services that will help to meet those goals.

Transition Services

IDEA defines transition services as a "coordinated set of activities within a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability and to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education." Generally, these services mirror the educationally related services and curriculum additions available for special education and related services. For example, instruction and assistance with a college search – including contacting colleges and collecting information on disability services and documentation requirements – might be part of a transition plan. Organizing documentation and anticipating accommodations might also be included.

Summary of Performance

When a child exits special education services due to graduation, the school is now required by IDEA 2004 to provide the child with a summary of his or her academic achievement and functional performance, as well as recommendations on how to assist him or her in meeting post-secondary goals. The U.S. Department of Education has not provided any regulatory guidelines for the Summary of Performance requirement. One of the most detailed templates for pulling together the information required in the Summary of Performance was developed by the National Transition Documentation Summit in 2005. Because it is both broad and detailed, it is adaptable to a variety of uses and individuals and makes a good guide to thinking about what information to ask the school to provide. It can be found at: http://vacollegequest.org/charting/performance_form.shtml.

Use the Checklist that follows to develop your plan and know what to include in your child's Summary of Performance upon graduation.

A Checklist for the Critical Points in College Transition Planning

This checklist focuses on transition issues and is meant to supplement the wide range of material available to all students in planning for college.

Each of the items on this list can be incorporated as IEP goals as students progress through high school.

Grades 7-9 *(Ages 12-14)*

Formal transition planning starts at the first IEP meeting when the student is 16 years old. But decisions impacting the college preparation curriculum typically begin in seventh or eighth grade.

✓ **Discuss the student's choices for college preparation curriculum and identify needed accommodations and supports, including assistive technology.**
- Identify the student's challenges and strengths in the areas of mathematics, second language, writing, reading and science.
- Identify accommodations and supports that will allow the student to participate in the curriculum.

✓ **Summarize the existing documentation of the disability:**
- List evaluations (including formal tests descriptions of observations or interventions as part of an RTI process)
- Include dates, versions (or types of format tests given) and who administered them
- Include dates, settings and who conducted observations or interventions
- Describe the identified impacts on learning processes such as reading (phonics, rate, automaticity, comprehension), writing (grammar, spelling, organization, rate), memory (encoding, retrieval, short-term, long-term, visual, auditory), and attention.

✓ **Summarize the accommodations provided on district-wide tests (past and upcoming):**
- Describe the format of each test (e.g. multiple choice)
- List the accommodations provided for each test format
- Identify evaluation data supporting each accommodation used on district-wide tests.

✓ **Identify areas where evaluations will need updating in order to:**
- Understand the impact of the disability on changing high school curriculum demands
- Identify the full range of potential accommodations and supports
- Suggest effective assistive technologies
- Discuss scheduling any needed formal evaluation updates after 14th birthday (when adult norms will be appropriate).

✓ **Include "Evaluating the effectiveness of accommodations and auxiliary aids" as an IEP goal.**

Grades 9-10 *(Age 14-16)*
(Make sure that you have already completed the checklist for Grades 7-9)

✓ **Review and summarize the effectiveness of supports and accommodations in various learning and evaluation settings such as:**
- Lecture-based learning
- Reading-based learning
- Group/collaborative learning
- Experiential/lab-based learning
- Evaluation formats (papers, presentations, essay tests, multiple choice tests, etc.).

✓ **Increase the use of college-appropriate accommodations.**
- Use more modifications in delivery and format (assistive technology, extended time, shared notes, etc.).
- Use fewer modifications of the curriculum (such as shorter and more frequent testing, mastery-learning testing, rephrasing/explaining test questions, alternative goals, etc.).

✓ **Plan to take a preparatory course for the SAT (the PSAT) and/or ACT (PLAN).**
- Ask about the differences between the SAT and ACT in order to determine which test matches the student's strengths.
- Identify accommodations to use for standardized testing.
- Identify needed documentation updates to support testing accommodations.

Grade 11 *(Ages 16-17)*
(Make sure that you have already completed the checklists for Grades 7-10)

✓ **Gather information from colleges:**
- Identify key differences in rights and responsibilities at the college level
- Find contact information for disability services offices of potential colleges
- Understand the scope of disability services available
- Know the documentation requirements
- Identify available academic support services (tutoring, writing labs, etc.).

✓ **Evaluate current accommodations and supports for appropriateness at the college level.**

✓ **Discuss accommodations for the SAT or ACT.**

✓ **Consider summer pre-college programs for students with disabilities (A listing of such programs is available at http://www.heath.gwu.edu/)**

Grade 12 *(Ages 17-18)*
(Make sure that you have already completed the checklists for Grades 7-11)

✔ **Visit the disability services offices when touring the college and ask any questions that you may have.**

✔ **Student should be able to describe how his or her condition will impact the following aspects of learning in college:**
- Classes (lectures, laboratory, web-based, collaborative groups)
- Assignments (reading, writing, calculating, keyboarding, library work)
- Communication (speaking, listening, using phones, using e-mail)
- Evaluation (tests, papers, oral reports, group presentations, projects)
- Time constraints (timed tests, deadlines, assignment due dates)
- Attendance (class, required activities, residential living requirements).

✔ **Student should be able to explain how accommodations compensate for the impacts of his or her disability on the aspects of learning listed above.**

✔ **Identify assistive technology that will be needed after high school.**

✔ **Review and supplement the Summary of Performance required by IDEA.**

✔ **The Summary of Performance should provide:**
- A statement (from the school) identifying the disability for which services are provided
- A description of the student's current functional limitations (such as reading speed, memory, and attention)
- The expected progression or stability of the functional limitations
- A description of current and past accommodations, services, supports and/or medications
- Recommendations for accommodations, adaptive devices, assistive services, compensatory strategies, and/or collateral support services.

✔ **Obtain copies of past evaluations (including formal psycho-educational testing, observations and RTI data) since age 14 that indicate:**
- The credentials of the evaluator(s)
- Scores and narratives from psycho-educational testing
- The context and method used (behaviors observed) for observations or RTI data collection
- The conclusions drawn from the evaluation concerning functional strengths and limitations.

Resources

Parent Guide to IDEA 2004
http://www.LD.org/IDEAguide

Transition Timeline - Your "To Do" List
http://www.vacollegequest.org/charting/transitiontimeline.shtml

College Accommodation Planning
http://ada.osu.edu/resources/college_accomodation.htm

Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education
http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html

Auxiliary Aids and Services for Postsecondary Students with Disabilities: Higher Education's Obligations Under Section 504 and Title II of the ADA
http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/auxaids.html

The Civil Rights of Students with Hidden Disabilities Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973
http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/hq5269.html

Getting Ready For College: Advising High School Students With Learning Disabilities
http://www.heath.gwu.edu/PDFs/GR.pdf

Toto, I Have a Feeling We're Not in High School Anymore
http://www.umt.edu/dss/new_students/toto/default.htm

Transition and Your Adolescent with Learning Disabilities: Moving from High School to Postsecondary Education, Training, and Employment
http://raven.cc.ku.edu/~tcacs/new/files/adol_convert.pdf

Going to College by Elizabeth Evans Getzel and Paul Wehman
http://www.brookespublishing.com/store/books/getzel-742x/index.htm

Postsecondary Innovative Transition Technology
http://www.postitt.org

Going to College: Successful Transitions for Students with LD
http://www.ncld.org/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=898

Self-determination
http://ncset.org/topics/sdpse/default.asp?topic=7

Find these other Parent Advocacy Briefs at:
http://www.LD.org/ParentBriefs

• **Understanding Assessment Options for IDEA eligible Students under No Child Left Behind**

• **Determining Appropriate Assessment Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**

• **Making the Most of No Child Left Behind Options for Students**

• **Understanding High-Stakes Testing and Its Impact on Students with Learning Disabilities**

• **A Parent's Guide to Response-to-Intervention**

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The National Center for Learning Disabilities works to ensure that the nation's 15 million children, adolescents and adults with learning disabilities have every opportunity to succeed in school, work and life. NCLD provides essential information to parents, professionals and individuals with learning disabilities, promotes research and programs to foster effective learning and advocates for policies to protect and strengthen educational rights and opportunities.

For more information, please visit us on the Web at http://www.LD.org.

About the Author: L. Scott Lissner has served as the American's With Disabilities Act (ADA) Coordinator for The Ohio State University since January of 2000 and is responsible for ensuring the University's compliance with State and Federal mandates requiring access for individuals with disabilities to the university's full range of programs, work opportunities, facilities and services. Collaborating with key university units, he develops policy and procedure; provides training and consultation on disability and accommodations; and is the university's grievance officer for disability-related concerns. Mr. Lissner collaborates with the Ohio Department of Education and U.S. Department of Education to present workshops on the transition from high school to college for students with disabilities and to provide training for college faculty and administrators. He has taught college courses in statistics, psychology, education, and disability law. Mr. Lissner serves on the executive board of the Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) and most recently coauthored "From Legal Principle to Informed Practice" published by AHEAD. A regular presenter at national conferences, he also consults with schools, agencies and businesses on access and accommodation policies. Mr. Lissner holds a Bachelor of Arts in psychology and economics from Rutgers University and a Master's degree in counseling from Hunter College of the City University of New York. He began doctoral level study and research in cognitive psychology at Adelphi University and is completing his doctoral studies on disability policy in the University of Virginia's Educational Policy Studies program.