

# Planning for Success in Postsecondary Education Takes Time and Organization

Students with disabilities who are planning to further their education beyond high school will discover that most postsecondary programs have many entrance and academic requirements. Families can help their student prepare for a smooth transition to postsecondary education by considering three important areas during the transition planning process:

1. Documenting the disability
2. Paying for education-related expenses such as assistive technology needed in a postsecondary setting
3. Involving agencies in post-high school planning

A first step for students and their parents is to realize that new partners can join their transition planning team. For example, representatives from both the state vocational rehabilitation services agency and the prospective school may be able to provide valuable information or resources that can help students and their families save time and avoid difficulty.

Most colleges and universities have an Office of Disability Student Services (DSS), which provides some level of service, support, or accommodations to their students with disabilities. DSS staff should be able to address the scope and depth of supports offered by their institution, and will know what kind of documentation their school requires for students to receive accommodations.

A vocational rehabilitation counselor from the state can help clarify that agency's role in the student's future, including higher education. Vocational rehabilitation services may be able to support some of the cost for postsecondary education or training as long as that training is closely linked to a person's overall employment plan.

## **Documenting the Disability**

Postsecondary programs generally ask for current documentation verifying the disability of students who request accommodations. Colleges, universities, and technical schools may ask for assessment documents that, 1) show that the student's disability continues over time, and 2) confirm the student needs accommodations and identify what accommodations have been the most effective.

A rule of thumb is that documentation should be less than three years old. Students planning for postsecondary education should obtain the necessary documents before high school graduation. Some colleges are easing the requirements for documentation. However, to avoid confusion, it is wise to research exactly what the individual school requires.

Postsecondary institutions do not typically accept high school Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) as documentation of a disability. If they are disability-specific and current, students can usually present test results used to create the IEP. For example, a student with learning disabilities may submit the evaluation done in his or her junior year as documentation of a disability. Students are encouraged to keep their IEPs as they may document academic accommodations that were successful in high school. This may help with the accommodation negotiation process in college.

The postsecondary school asks for different documentation, it is the student's responsibility to obtain and provide the information. After a student leaves high school, the student or his or her family are responsible for collecting and maintaining school files and medical records.

## **The Summary of Performance**

Language in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) states that school districts “must provide the child with a summary of his or her academic achievement and functional performance, including recommendations on how to assist the child in meeting postsecondary goals.” This is known as the Summary of Performance or the SOP. The SOP, which is completed during a student’s final year of high school, lists current functioning in key academic, vocational, and life skills areas. It also lists “essential accommodations” used to help improve functioning in those areas. Students can provide the school with their SOP as evidence of effective accommodations.

## **Paying for the Education**

If postsecondary education is in the future of their child with a disability, parents need to know they may have to pay for the costs themselves. Colleges and post-secondary schools are not required to provide a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities. However, they cannot charge for disability-related accommodations. Parents should explore financial aid options early. A common reason why young people drop out of college programs is that the family did not plan for the cost of postsecondary education.

## **Involving Agencies**

Interagency collaboration is a wise transition practice. It allows the transition team to quickly and effectively address issues by using the expertise and resources of agencies outside the special education system. Agencies from adult service systems can help students obtain supports that will be needed in a postsecondary setting such as assistive technology, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and work incentives.

Involving a vocational rehabilitation counselor from your state’s Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency, for example, can inform the student’s transition team about employment supports the student can access during and after high school.

VR services are generally available to eligible young adults with disabilities when they are 16. If a student qualifies for VR services, the state VR agency may pay some postsecondary education expenses when the course of study will lead to the student’s future employment in an identified career, vocation, or field. For example, financial help from

VR may cover testing to document a student’s disability or accommodation needs; help with tuition; or help purchasing of equipment that can be used later in employment, such as tools needed in a vocational education program or a specialized computer. The family will still need to apply for financial aid from other sources before VR will pay.

Before VR counselors invest in a student’s postsecondary studies, they must be convinced that it is an appropriate goal for the student and that it will lead to a positive employment outcome. Bringing VR counselors into the transition planning process acquaints them with the student’s interests and can help them understand how higher education will help the young adult achieve employment goals. Even after a student’s eligibility is established, VR agencies may not have the funds to provide requested services and supports. Lack of funding often results in waiting lists.

While there are challenges for students with disabilities who want to explore postsecondary education, students and families can smooth the path through proper planning. Understanding requirements for documenting a disability, tuition payment options, and involving appropriate community agency partners can help youth realize their goals of continuing their education and training past high school.