

# Going to College: Tips for Parents of Students with Visual Impairments

College is an exciting time of life for both parents and youth, but it also can be stressful, especially when the student has a visual impairment. This guide can help you prepare your son or daughter with a vision impairment for success in postsecondary education.

## Find the Right School

For students with and without disabilities, the process of choosing a college usually begins in junior year of high school. It typically includes meeting with a school guidance counselor for advice on options that meet the student's academic abilities and goals. You and your youth with a vision impairment may want to seek additional advice from a counselor at the local branch of the state agency that serves the blind. Some states have Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs that serve individuals with any disability, while others have separate agencies serving individuals with visual impairments. A counselor from VR can help you develop a plan that addresses transition and accommodation issues. He or she also can recommend services and resources that might be helpful in college and provide materials and assistive technology (AT) that support the plan.

Once you and your young adult have identified prospective colleges, the next step is to explore the disability services and accommodations that each provides. Accommodations are important because they level the academic playing field and give your son or daughter an equal opportunity to succeed in college. Each college or university will vary in its capacity to effectively provide supports to students with visual impairments. Although public universities typically offer more accommodations to students with visual impairments than smaller schools, it is wise to investigate all prospective

colleges to make sure they have the resources your child will need before you commit to a particular school.

## Contact the College's Department of Disabilities Services

As soon as your son or daughter has accepted an offer of admission, he or she should set up a meeting with the college's office of disability services. This office is designed to help students secure necessary academic accommodations before classes begin. Your youth will need to provide proof of a visual impairment, such as a medical report from an ophthalmologist or other doctor, at this meeting.

A disabilities services support staff can then act as an advocate on behalf of your son or daughter and can help your youth draft letters to professors explaining the accommodations that will be needed in class. (Although professors must provide these accommodations, no course or curriculum may be modified for any student.)

The Office of Disability services can provide other accommodations as well, including:

- Alternative formats, such as braille or large-print exams
- An aide to accompany your student to class to take notes and assist in labs, if necessary
- Conversion of books and other materials into accessible formats

You may want to attend the first meeting with the college disability staff and your son or daughter so you can be familiar with the services provided.

## Obtain Assistive Technology (AT)

Although the college's disability services office may have

AT available, your son or daughter will need his or her own laptop computer and AT for daily use. You can purchase them yourself or ask that they be provided by State Services, if appropriate.

In addition to computers, State Services can provide many types of AT, including text-to-speech software such as Jaws for Windows or Window Eyes, and text enlargement programs such as Zoom-Text.

Other pieces of AT may be needed as well. For example, your youth might need a note-taking device, such as a Packmate or BrailleNote. Both are devices with either a braille or standard computer keyboard, text-to-speech capabilities, and a braille display, which provides alternative access to the material. A tape recorder may also be needed.

Keep in mind that assistive technology changes rapidly. Every year technological improvements are made that allow students to do more for themselves in the classroom. Consult your State Services counselor or local assistive technology resource for the most current products.

## Explore the Campus

One of the most stressful aspects of transitioning to college can be the size and unfamiliarity of the college campus. Here are four tips to help your youth become familiar with the campus before school starts.

- *Plan Ahead:* Obtain a copy of your youth's class schedule in advance so you and your student can become familiar with the locations of the classroom buildings.
- *Seek Help:* If your son or daughter has had an orientation and mobility instructor in the past, you may want the instructor to orient your student to the campus.
- *Connect with the Community:* Find the grocery stores, coffee shops, book stores, restaurants, and other locations where students congregate. Doing so will give your youth the ability to be social outside of class—and that ability can remove a large part of the transitional stress.
- *Warm to the Dorm:* Upon your arrival, meet with some of the dormitory staff so they can be made aware of your student's disability. Afterward, explore the building or ask a staff member or returning student familiar with

the building to show you around. Be sure to locate the cafeteria, bathrooms, and bathing facilities if separate from the rest of the bathroom. Your youth also will need to know how to travel independently from the lobby of the dormitory to his or her room. Roommates can be helpful with this task.

## Conclusion

The most important thing parents can do when helping their son or daughter prepare for college is to offer support. You can do that by involving yourself in the transition process, helping with the choice of schools, attending the first meeting at the disability services office, working with counselors from State Services and the college's disability services office, and helping your student become familiar with his or her new surroundings.

College settings offer many lessons. You can teach an important one by showing your youth how to locate services, resources, and supports, and be a successful self-advocate.