

SECTION IV: HOW CAN STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES PLAN TO ACCESS POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION AND TRAINING?

Are the laws for K-12 education different than for PSET after high school?

All states provide a free, public education to all students with disabilities until graduation or at least to age 21. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ensures that both private and government-funded postsecondary programs must be accessible to individuals with disabilities; however, there are no direct services or funding for students with disabilities in conjunction with the ADA. [This document, explaining Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act](#) provides clarity regarding admissions and accessibility into PSET. NTACTION has developed [a chart that delineates some of the differences between K-12 education and postsecondary education](#).

It is important to highlight the differences between academic accommodations and modifications, as discussed in the linked chart. In K-12 education under IDEA, students with disabilities may be entitled to both accommodations, which are alterations of environment, curriculum format, or equipment that allows a student to gain access to the curricular content, as well as modifications, which are changes in the curriculum that may be made for students who are unable to comprehend all of the curricular content as identified in their IEP. However, only accommodations may be used in (a) state assessments of academic progress, (b) college entrance exams, and (c) college coursework, in pursuit of a terminal degree.

Colleges have different mechanisms for providing accommodations to which students with disabilities may be entitled, and these services may include student accessibility offices, writing centers, learning labs, and/or academic coaching centers. It is important to note that in all cases, students must independently access – and keep accessing – these services in order to receive their accommodations. Whereas, under IDEA, teachers and schools are obligated to ensure that each student is receiving their accommodations and modifications, ADA simply states colleges must make these services available. This highlights the importance of self-advocacy skills, as students will need to advocate for what they need and ensure they are accessing the services and supports to allow them to be successful. Providing self-advocacy instruction is another area where either educators or VR service providers may have an important role in preparing students. This instruction may occur as a collaborative effort between schools and VR, or it may occur independently. It is critical students are prepared to advocate for themselves. For more detailed guidance on how VR, specifically, may support these skills, view #5 in [the Transition Services section](#) of the Competitive Integrated Employment Toolkit.

What documentation is required for different types of support or different programs?

Just as the laws that govern access to services change from secondary to postsecondary education, the documentation needed to access services in those programs change. The Office of Civil Rights (OCR) provides guidance on applying for college and the information an applicant may be expected to provide in order to access supports as a student with a disability. Because each institution may require slightly different types of documentation regarding an individual's disability and support needs, it is important for a student, with support of their family and IEP team, to gather information from a specific institution. As noted in the OCR guide,

“Institutions may set their own requirements for documentation so long as they are reasonable and comply with Section 504 and Title II. It is not uncommon for documentation standards to vary from institution to institution; thus, students with disabilities should research documentation standards at those institutions that interest them. A student must provide documentation, upon request, that he or she has a disability, that is, an impairment that substantially limits a major life activity and that supports the need for an academic adjustment. The documentation should identify how a student's ability to function is limited as a result of her or his disability. The primary purpose of the documentation is to establish a disability in order to help the institution work interactively with the student to identify appropriate services. The focus should be on whether the information adequately documents the existence of a current disability and need for an academic adjustment.” (FAQ Question 7, OCR, 2011, retrieved <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transitionguide.html>).

Entrance requirements for individual PSET programs vary widely and each must be reviewed by any student planning to apply. College entrance exams such as the SAT[®] or the *American College Test (ACT)*, specific coursework (e.g., number of math courses, foreign language), essays, or interviews are likely required components of the admissions requirements for a 4-year college/ university. However, not all colleges/ universities require these components. It is critical for a student and family to be informed regarding both the state's graduation requirements, as well as the specific entrance requirements of possible PSET programs for themselves or their child early in their high school career. The [College Navigator from the U.S. Department of Education](#) and a student's school counselor are reliable sources for this information. Specifically for students with disabilities, a student's counselor, special education teacher, or transition coordinator, and the [National Center for College Students with Disabilities \(NCCSD\)](#) provide a wealth of resources for future college students, and specifically highlights this [Tips for Campus Visits from HBCU Disability Consortium](#). Additionally, it is important that students and their IEP teams understand how to use accommodations in the assessment process and what documentation may be required to access accommodations on certain types of assessment that may be components of the admission requirements for a program.

Who is responsible for obtaining necessary testing to document the existence of a disability?

Currently, the student and family have the responsibility of obtaining documentation of the existence of a disability. Institutions of postsecondary education are not required to conduct or pay for an evaluation to document a student's disability and need for an academic adjustment, although some institutions do so. An IEP team may determine that evaluations are necessary as part of a student's re-evaluation for services, though are not required to do so under IDEA (2004). It may also be appropriate for a student to be evaluated for eligibility for VR services, which might be another source of documentation needed for PSET supports and an excellent opportunity to collaborate among the student, family, school, and VR to plan for the student's successful future.

Another useful tool at this juncture of planning, is a student's SOP. In addition, a student receiving services under Part B of *the* IDEA must be provided with a summary of his or her academic achievements and functional performance that includes recommendations on how to assist in meeting the student's postsecondary goals. This information may provide helpful information about disability and the need for an academic adjustment (IDEA Regulations 34 C.F.R. §300.305(e)(3)). In fact, the SOP may be the most current documentation of disability and support needs available to students preparing to go to college (Shaw, Keenan, Madaus, & Banerjee, M., 2010). However, reviews of practice indicate that not all states or local districts complete the SOP in a manner that is useful for college or employment planning (Shaw et al., 2010). While the SOP holds promise, if executed well, this same review of practice noted that some disability support service offices do not want to accept the SOP because they do not want to be "subject to IDEA" (p. 146) and did not feel the SOP would be "helpful or objective enough to support documentation decisions" (p. 146).

Is a student's most recent individualized education program (IEP) or Section 504 plan sufficient documentation to support the existence of a disability and the need for an academic adjustment in a postsecondary setting?

Though an IEP or Section 504 plan may help identify services that have been used by the student in the past, they generally are not sufficient documentation to support the existence of a current disability and need for an academic adjustment from an institution of postsecondary education. Assessment information and other material used to develop an IEP or Section 504 plan may be helpful to document a current disability or the need for an academic adjustment or auxiliary aids and services. Almost all colleges and universities will require current evaluation results, confirming a student's diagnosis of a disability and needed or recommended accommodations, associated with the disability for services to be provided.

Documentation of a disability, including current evaluation data, is also necessary for students or young adults to be provided accommodations through employer-based training programs. VR agencies are excellent resources for navigating and assisting young adults who are seeking postsecondary training with an employer or through a non-traditional or non-degree program. Additionally, Centers for Independent Living are good resources to assist in transition planning to access and enroll in postsecondary training programs focused skills for navigating and engaging in one's community and other daily living skills. Consult the [Independent Living Research Utilization](#) program for information on CILs.

Should a student disclose about their disability when applying to college?

It is a personal decision to determine whether or not to disclose one's disability to anyone else. That said, there may be advantages to disclosing upon applying, such as explaining a lower SAT[®] or ACT scores, or significant discrepancies between subtests of the SAT[®] /ACT, or a dramatic improvement in course performance in high school after accessing a specific form of assistive technology. Additionally, instructors and accessibility services professionals may be better able to recommend appropriate supports and services to help the student achieve success if the disability is disclosed. Cole and Cawthon (2016) concluded that students who disclosed their disability chose to do so based on past positive experiences with teachers or professors about their learning and perceived the professor or instructor as kind. In addition, findings from a review of literature regarding support services in college (Madaus et al., 2016) indicated that disclosing one's disability as early as possible upon entry to college was associated with success in college.

The reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act in 2014 required all federal contractors or subcontractors to attempt to have 7% of their workforce be qualified individuals with disabilities. This provision has led the Office of Management and Budget to make a form available to employers including those with training arms to gather: [voluntary disability disclosure information](#). The [411 on Disability Disclosure](#) is a frequently used resource to assist students as they examine the pros and cons of disclosure.

What are good planning processes for postsecondary education and training while students are still in K-12?

Transition-focused education is a perspective on the education and services provided to students with disabilities that include "academic, career, and extracurricular instruction" (Kohler & Field, 2003) that are individualized, strengths based, and always (from elementary school through high school) focused on post-school goals. It is a comprehensive, coordinated approach to education including course participation, specific instruction, and services needed to achieve those goals. Considering PSET as an outcome throughout a student's educational

career has implications for many aspects of the K-12 experience. Additionally, identifying postsecondary education as a goal should encourage an IEP planning team to identify specific skills and experiences the student needs now – in 7th grade, 10th grade, 12th grade, or post-12th grade – that will prepare him or her for the greatest likelihood of success.

The opportunity for students to engage in Career and Technical Education while in high school, can provide the needed skills and preparation for postsecondary education and entering the workforce. Career and technical education (CTE) provides students with the academic, technical, and employability skills and knowledge to pursue postsecondary training or higher education and enter a career field prepared for ongoing learning (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Association for Career and Technical Education, & National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium, 2010).

It is critical that parents and educators understand the impact of curricular decisions made at very young ages. Research indicates a student's program of study is correlated with their postsecondary outcomes (Newman & Madaus, 2015; Test et al., 2009). As students with disabilities move into middle school and high school, the courses they complete to achieve a diploma also dictate the postsecondary education options available to them after high school. For example, a student who accesses the general curriculum through extended standards throughout elementary school and demonstrates proficiency in the general education curriculum through alternate assessments may not be in a position to complete courses in high school that are required for admission to a degree granting institution. Further, a student accessing the general curriculum, almost solely in classes with peers with disabilities and completing an aligned pathway toward a diploma is less likely to complete courses required for successful enrollment in traditional postsecondary education. As a result, students, families, and IEP teams need to carefully consider decisions to place students in specific curricular options from elementary, to middle school, to high school. Finally, if a student is interested in furthering their education in alignment with a specific career field, completing relevant career and technical education course sequences may best prepare them for postsecondary education, as well as postsecondary training programs – depending on the student's goals and support needs.

Degree-granting institutions are postsecondary institutions that provide study beyond secondary school and offer programs terminating in an associate's, baccalaureate, or higher degree and participate in federal financial aid programs (Hussar & Bailey, 2016). For a student to enroll in degree-granting institutions, usually the student must demonstrate competencies with specific academic skills. Students who participate in rigorous academic instruction in K-12 are more likely demonstrate skills and meet qualifications to apply to such degree granting postsecondary programs (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Gregg, 2007).

Not every degree-granting program requires a student to complete the standard, college-ready curriculum. Again, those details should be examined by a student and family with a school counselor, a graduation coach, or the IEP team. Career certification, associate degree, and some bachelor degree programs may expect a high school diploma, but allow students to

complete various course sequences to achieve the diploma. Many states offer pathways toward a diploma that reflect the U.S. Department of Labor’s career clusters. Planning with a school counselor, VR counselor, and the entire IEP team includes a process of setting educational goals and determining the best path to meet those goals. This requires students to work with a counselor or teacher to access resources, so they best understand the labor market and various career pathway options. This planning process is fostered in many middle and high schools for all students as part of the graduation planning process and for students with disabilities may also be achieved through a rigorous transition assessment and planning process.

Typically, a high school diploma is required to access many types of postsecondary education. As noted in Wilkins and Bost’s 2016 review of dropout prevention interventions, not graduating from high school with a standard diploma is associated with negative adult outcomes such as unemployment, low wages, incarceration, poverty, and poor health. The importance of graduation and implementation of effective practices has gained momentum over the last two decades; however, there continues to be a graduation rate gap for students with disabilities. According to a 2017 national report, the gap between graduation rates for students with and without disabilities is 21.2 percentage points nationally (GradNation, 2017). In four states, the graduation rate for students with disabilities is below 50 percent. Please see NTACTION’s School Completion Toolkit (coming Fall, 2018) at www.transitionta.org. It is critical school teams and IEP teams attend to factors likely to lead a student to graduation including (a) using data systems that identify students at risk of dropping out early, (b) implementing quality mentoring programs, (c) positively and meaningfully engaging with families, and (d) providing effective academic interventions for all students – including students with disabilities (Wilkins & Bost, 2016).

Title I of the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), allows for the inclusion in graduation accountability of a diploma option for students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards. The inclusion of a State-defined alternate diploma in the Title I Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) accountability was new for states with this legislation. Several states, as of Spring 2018, had adopted or were moving to an adopt this option. Guidance on this legislation and necessary considerations are available in [Considerations for Developing State Defined Alternate Diplomas for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities](#), developed by the National Center on Educational Outcomes and the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition.

Considering postsecondary education or training as an outcome throughout a student’s educational career has implications for many aspects of the K-12 experience. Identifying postsecondary education as a goal should encourage an IEP planning team to identify specific skills and experiences the student needs now that will prepare him or her for the greatest likelihood of success.

Of course, once a student's IEP is required to identify a postsecondary education/training goal – somewhere between the ages of 13 and 16 (depending on state law), a student's courses of study, transition services, and annual goals must align with the identified postsecondary education and training goals. These are legal requirements from IDEA (2004); but, should be much more than simple items on a checklist to comply with the law.

As noted in Section I, part of planning for postsecondary education access and success can also use the IDEA (2004) SOP (SOP) document. The SOP provides a “summary of the child's academic achievement and functional performance, which shall include recommendations on how to assist the child in meeting the child's postsecondary goals.” [IDEA Regulations 34 C.F.R. §300.305(e)(3).] The SOP must be completed during the student's last year of services; however, compiling relevant information throughout high school is encouraged. To develop the SOP, the student and IEP team should work together to provide information to appropriate postsecondary settings about accommodations that do and do not work well for the student. This process helps the student, particularly when the student is closely involved, learn what to advocate for when arriving on a postsecondary campus or employed in a workplace. Ideally, a student will be able to share the SOP with future employers and postsecondary institutions in order to obtain reasonable accommodations, as well as to share information about what types of supports work best. While there is not a mandatory template for the SOP, sample templates that are considered best practice are available. The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) website offers two sample SOP documents ([Ohio's Summary of Performance Packet](#) and [North Carolina's Summary of Performance Document](#)) and an [annotated bibliography](#) as resources.

These resources are especially important to consider implementing as students progress towards graduation. Teachers may consider making it a point to complete an SOP on all students with disabilities who have expressed a desire to pursue postsecondary education. It is important to note the SOP could be used for students who have IEPs and/or 504 plans under the Americans with Disabilities Act. It is important that student-focused, student-driven, and student-led philosophies are reflected at every stage of planning. Self-determination and its component skills of goal setting and self-advocacy are predictors of success in postsecondary education (Mazzotti et al., 2015). Ensuring the student's interests and strengths are the focus of decisions regarding curricula, placement, and post-

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school goals regarding education and training are critical to a young person's success in those goals. Similarly, research indicates that student engagement in school work and the school community are associated with high school completion (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the various roles and responsibilities associated with the planning process. The student is, of course, central to planning for PSET success. All others are advisors and navigators. Due to potential costs and support needs, family members are also clearly critical to PSET planning.

- **Family members** may help students understand the importance of additional education after high school and may have a role in decisions regarding the financing of, and transportation to, PSET programs.
- **Teachers** play a critical role by providing rigorous academic instruction and opportunities to develop employment, self-determination, and other independent living skills.
- **Special education teachers** may also be engaged in helping the student plan access to supports and accommodations, completing and interpreting transition assessment results, and preparing for the IEP meeting.
- **VR counselors** may provide counseling on postsecondary education and training as one of the required pre-employment transition services offered to individual students or groups of students ([#3 in Transition Services section of the Competitive Integrated Employment Toolkit provides more detailed guidance on this role](#))
- **VR counselors** may be involved in the assessment process or determining, and possibly providing, appropriate services for a student to access in and succeed in PSET.

School counselors and related service providers may be involved in providing information and resources through assessments, consultations, and services to assist the student and the IEP team as they identify courses of study and transition services during middle and high school that best prepare a student for PSET success.

Students are the primary drivers and consumers of the PSET planning. The following timeline may be a helpful guide to the PSET application process. While developed for students with disabilities applying to 2- and 4-year colleges; the steps could be adapted, depending on the type of program a student is considering and the level of support the student may need from counselors, teachers, and family members to prepare to attend any PSET program.

Graduation Year College Application Timeline

Create a master list that includes:

- College entrance exams and their fees, dates, and registration deadlines
- College application due dates
 - Make note of the decision type (Early Action, Early Decision, Regular Decision)
- Financial aid application forms required and their deadlines
- Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) deadlines

- Other necessary materials (recommendations, transcripts, etc.)
- The student's high school's own application processing deadlines

In general:

- If needed, register to take the ACT in September and the SAT® in October
- Narrow college choices to 5-7 colleges - Apply only to schools the student wants to attend
 - Be sure to have a range of schools from "safety" schools to "reach" schools
- Gather up-to-date tax information as close to January 1 as possible for financial aid applications
- Write essays early; edit, proofread, and revise
- Look out for scholarship opportunities

Check with college financial aid offices for school-specific scholarship information, costs, and any additional financial aid forms required

Apply for VR services and, if eligible, develop an individualized plan for employment that may include financial assistance for postsecondary education and training (needed to achieve a specific vocational goal)

Have SAT® and/or ACT scores sent to colleges

September

Prepare all rolling admissions applications early

Keep copies of everything mailed or document the dates applications are submitted online

Ask teachers, counselors, or other references to write letters of recommendation well in advance (3-4 weeks)

If needed take the ACT

Be sure to have essays proofread (ask a teacher)

October

Prepare Early Decision or Early Action applications by October 1

Be sure to verify the schools' application dates/deadlines

Continue to look out for scholarships and make sure to meet the deadlines

If needed take the SAT®

November

Finalize college applications

Try to complete at least one application by Thanksgiving

Make sure transcript requests are into the high school's counseling office well in advance, at least 2 weeks before the deadline – check with colleges to see if they want the applicant's first semester grades

December

Make sure all applications are completed by December 1 and keep copies of everything sent to colleges

Prepare to complete the FAFSA as close to January 1 as possible

January

Complete the FAFSA as soon as possible

Continue looking out for scholarship opportunities and meeting the deadlines

February

Do not stop working hard now that college applications are submitted

Remember the schools will request a final transcript

March

Watch out for college acceptance decisions

College acceptance letters and financial aid offers should be received early March through mid-April. If placed on the wait list of a school the students would like to attend, send additional information to update and support their application at this time

April

If necessary, attend college campus "Accepted Student Events" to help make a decision

Colleges cannot require a deposit or commitment to attend before May 1 (common reply date)

By the postmarked date of May 1 the student must inform every college of either acceptance or rejection of the offer of admission and/or financial aid.

Notify the high school counseling office of the student's college choice as soon as a decision has been made, so the student's final transcript can be sent following graduation

Contact the financial aid office of the college the student plan to attend with any questions concerning the financial aid package (if applicable)

May

The deposit must reach the selected college/ university by May 1 (common reply date)

Make sure final transcripts are sent to the selected college

NOTES:

Be sure to have a professional email

Contact disability services before classes begin to arrange for accommodations

Find out what documentation the selected school requires

Be sure to have the necessary documentation (e.g., recent psychological testing, SOP, Section 504 documentation, IEP)

Keep a secure record of usernames and passwords for online applications (to the schools to which you apply)

Are there financial supports or challenges about which students and their families should be aware?

Each student and family must consider the financial burden of PSET. Without scholarships or loans, unlike K-12 education, PSET is a substantial expense for an individual or their family. Individuals and families pay for PSET on a payment schedule determined with the institution. Any student planning for PSET may work with their school counselor regarding available grants or scholarships for which they may apply and can search online for possible resources from community organizations, local businesses, or religious institutions. Additionally, an individual may investigate possible grants or scholarships available from the specific PSET to which they plan to apply. As noted in Section 1, students with intellectual disabilities (ID) can qualify for financial aid to federally approved postsecondary programs in order to access further education and training. Unlike other students with disabilities, students with ID may use their high school IEPs to document their disability and access accommodations in their higher education program (HEOA PL 110-315).

School counselors and PSET settings will also have information regarding student loans, which are then required to be paid back over a period of time. VR counselors may also assist with college affordability planning as a pre-employment transition service. A student may apply for VR services and, if eligible, develop an individualized plan for employment (IPE) that contains the services and supports, including postsecondary education and training, needed to achieve a specific vocational goal. VR services available include financial assistance for postsecondary education and training. Training provided through an employer or adult education programs accessed through an IPE or services provided through an adult agency for individuals with disabilities may negate or, at least, defray costs of non-traditional training programs after high school.

In addition to planning for the costs of participating in education or training, families may need to consider housing expenses, depending on the program. If students are attending a program away from their home, costs of campus or off-campus living must be planned. According to a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development study, over half of all college students living off campus, apart from family have incomes below the poverty level (Sackett, Goldrick-Rab, & Broton, 2016). Of course, completing a college program increases probability of earnings; but, planning for housing costs while in school is important.