Disability Services in Higher Education

Legal Framework for Disability Access in Education

In K–12, students with disabilities are guaranteed access and supports to achieve academic success in their educational programming under federal laws such as Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Schools are responsible for identifying students, providing services, and developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to ensure both access and "reasonably calculated progress." In K–12 settings, access and academic progress are guided and measured for students with disabilities with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 plan.

In Oklahoma, transition services must be in place before a student starts ninth grade or turns 15, whichever comes first. Transition services help students prepare for postsecondary education, employment, and independent living.

The legal responsibilities for students with disabilities shift once they are enrolled in postsecondary education. While protections continue under ADA Title II and Section 504, the focus shifts from guaranteed progress to equal access. Colleges must provide reasonable accommodations, which can include extra testing time, a quiet place to test, American Sign Language interpreters, classroom seating accommodations, and more. Modifications to the curriculum or academic standards are not considered a reasonable accommodation. Additionally, the responsibility shifts from the school initiating the process to the student being responsible for disclosing their disability and engaging in the accommodation process.

Student Rights and Responsibilities in Higher Education

In higher education, the process for receiving accommodations is different from K–12. Students must self-identify, provide documentation, and actively communicate with both the Disability Services Office

(DSO) and their instructors. While in K–12 professionals usually guide this process to guarantee progress, in higher education the responsibility shifts to the student to initiate and guide the process.

Accommodations are not automatically applied in higher education. Students must request them and follow their school's process for doing so. Available accommodations may include classroom supports, testing accommodations, housing or dining adjustments, or temporary accommodations, with a focus on equal access.

What Does a College Disability Services Office Do?

While processes may vary between institutions, the responsibility of the Disability Services Offices (DSOs) is to review and verify disability documentation, determine reasonable accommodations with the student, and coordinate access to academic programs and campus services. DSOs also serve as a resource for faculty and staff, promoting inclusive practices and ensuring institutional compliance with federal law.

Planning for the Transition

The transition from high school to college is a significant event for a student. With preparation, self-advocacy, and support, students with disabilities can successfully navigate higher education and achieve their goals.

Early High School (9th–10th Grade)

- **Students:** Take an active role in IEP/504 meetings; communicate needs at school and home; manage deadlines.
- **Families:** Support independence; guide rather than complete tasks.
- **Counselors & Educators:** Make sure transition planning is in place (by the start of 9th grade or age 15); involve students in meetings; teach self-advocacy skills.

Junior Year (11th Grade)

- **Students:** Research colleges, class sizes, support services, program requirements, and DSO processes; manage schedules independently.
- **Families:** Ask guiding questions and allow natural consequences.
- **Counselors & Educators:** Review documentation, discuss accommodations, and help students articulate their needs.

Senior Year (12th Grade)

- **Students:** Apply to colleges, connect with DSOs to request accommodations, and organize responsibilities.
- **Families:** Understand student privacy under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), set expectations for independence, and support self-advocacy.
- **Counselors & Educators:** Confirm graduation requirements, review goals, and connect students with DSOs.

Resources

- Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities — a guide from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights explaining students' rights and responsibilities in college (ed.gov).
- Disability Resource Guide — the Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services guide, including a Colleges and Universities, Student Support Services section (oklahoma.gov/okdrs).
- Think College — college search and information about college options for students with intellectual disabilities (thinkcollege.net).

Contacts

- Cam Cheek, Interpreting Coordinator, Oklahoma State University — cameron.cheek@okstate.edu | 405-334-3798
- Chelsey Thompson, Program Specialist, Student Accessibility Services, Oklahoma State University — chelsey.thompson@okstate.edu | 405-744-7116
- Lori Chesnut, Program Manager for Secondary Transition, Oklahoma State Department of Education, and Project Director, Oklahoma Pathways to Partnerships Grant — lori.chesnut@sde.ok.gov | 405-521-4802

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