

Tips to prepare students with intellectual disabilities for college expectations

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INTRODUCTION

As more students with intellectual disabilities have access to inclusive postsecondary education, educators and families must become familiar with the expectations of college students. Through feedback from college program coordinators (Grigal, et al., 2021), faculty (Jones, et al., 2016; Taylor, et al., 2021), secondary transition experts (NTACT, 2018), and students themselves (Nauheimer, et al., 2015; Paiewonsky, et al., 2017), we are learning how high school students can be better prepared to meet these college expectations. Students with intellectual disabilities may need more time to learn and practice skills that support college success.

In this Grab and Go Practices, we focus on **three primary campus experiences college students need to be prepared for**. Student may engage in these activities with little or no support from adults. These experiences include:

1. **Campus participation**
2. **Academic preparation**
3. **Personal responsibility**

Many skills students learn earlier in their education can be generalized to college, although some students may still require support or accommodations. How do these expectations arise at college? What strategies can we use to help students meet these expectations?

CAMPUS PARTICIPATION

If you spend a few hours on a college campus, you will notice how quickly students must learn to travel to college and use the campus resources. Students must learn how to use multiple modes of transportation, access student support services, and use the dining services for meals and breaks.



GETTING TO AND FROM COLLEGE.

Whether students plan to live on campus or attend as a commuter, they often must learn new transportation modes and routes to travel to and from the campus. Learning how to use public transportation while in high school gives students opportunities to practice various skills such as how to read transportation schedules, plan their travel time accordingly, and coordinate pick-up times if they use shared-ride or accessible transportation options. We recommend students learn their walking route or how to use public transportation to get to and from school.

NAVIGATING THE CAMPUS.

Even small college campuses are likely to be bigger than the typical high school. With student services spread across different departments, students must learn how to find and navigate these locations in a timely way. One way to prepare for this expectation is to build in opportunities for high school students to move about the high school independently, increasing the duration, locations, and time limits to return to the classroom.

USING THE STUDENT CENTER.

The college student center is often the hub of the campus, where students get together for coffee, meet up after class, or just hang out. Planning free time is not always as easy as it seems. To better prepare students for this experience, provide opportunities for high school students to make plans with friends, use a cash or money app, and plan their own route to an agreed upon meeting spot.

ACCESSING DISABILITY SERVICES.

One of the first things we recommend to students with disabilities who think they might need accommodations in college is to request a meeting with disabilities services staff. These intake meetings, usually start with questions like, "Can you describe your disability?", "How does your disability impact your learning?", and "What accommodations have been successful for your learning?". Some students have shared that they are not used to answering questions like this and don't know how to respond. We recommend having conversations with students about academic accommodations that are effective for them and then giving them multiple opportunities to request these accommodations from high school teachers.

UTILIZING ACADEMIC SUPPORT RESOURCES.

Most colleges offer students study skills or academic strategies workshops, either through an academic support center or through the adaptive computer lab. However, many students with intellectual disabilities are not accustomed to using accommodations in high school because their curriculum is modified and accommodations are not built in. We strongly recommend building in opportunities for students to learn to use accommodations in high school so they are better prepared to use them in college.

BUILD OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS TO LEARN TO USE ACCOMMODATIONS IN HIGH SCHOOL SO THEY ARE BETTER PREPARED TO USE THEM IN COLLEGE.

NEGOTIATING THE DINING CENTER.

Who doesn't like grabbing a bite to eat at the college dining center? It seems easy enough: order an entrée or select a prepared meal, pay for it, grab a seat, and dig in! But there are many decisions students must make that require a fair amount of coordination. Encourage students in high school to practice all the hidden skills necessary to consider the food choices, buy lunch, find people to eat with, and socialize. Consider opportunities in and out of school.

ACADEMIC PREPARATION

Students with intellectual disabilities who consider college are often most concerned about the classes, primarily because they are unaccustomed to accessing general education courses. Without this background, they are often unprepared for the expectations of students enrolled in college courses. Students will benefit from talking with their instructors, following the course syllabus, and engaging in class activities.



COMMUNICATING WITH THE INSTRUCTORS.

College students are expected to talk with their instructors if they have questions or concerns about the course, either before or after class or during the instructor's office hours. This can be intimidating for students who are used to others speaking to teachers on their behalf. In high school, students can be supported to discuss learning accommodations with their teachers and to communicate directly if they are going to be absent or late to class.

FOLLOWING A SYLLABUS.

A course syllabus is important in college because it serves as the blueprint for the course. Students are expected to be familiar with the syllabus and refer to it often to prepare for class and submit assignments. Students in high school benefit from using a course syllabus to learn these skills. Consider developing a syllabus to help orient students to typical sections of a syllabus including readings, assignments, and due dates, as well as how to communicate with the instructor.

BEING PREPARED FOR CLASS.

College students are expected to be prepared for class by reading the syllabus and following any directions instructors share in class or online. We recommend teaching students to follow a checklist that will guide them through class preparation, complete reading assignments, take and review notes, and anticipate topics that might be discussed in class.

TAKING NOTES.

There are numerous ways for students to take notes in class, but it is important for students to be prepared for this expectation. Instruct students on notetaking strategies, including how to incorporate technology such as a smart pen (e.g., Livescribe) and how to follow and summarize class discussions.

USING LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM.

Most college courses, even those that are held on campus, use a learning management system where instructors upload the syllabus and readings, post announcements, and host class discussions. High schools may be using the K12 versions of these learning management systems, such as Google Classroom and Schoology. High school students benefit greatly from using these systems and the tools often embedded in them, such as web conferencing for class meetings.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

College students learn quickly that once in college, students are expected to manage their own schedules, use campus resources, plan for their free time, and figure out how to attend events. This does not always come naturally to students with disabilities whose high school schedules are often developed by their IEP teams and overseen by special education teachers.



MANAGING SCHEDULES.

College students usually manage between two and four courses a semester, which includes attending classes and completing the related work. Students with disabilities might also meet with an academic tutor or peer mentor in between classes. Beyond academic responsibilities, students may be involved in campus activities. These are just a few of the activities college students have to manage. While still in high school, younger students preparing for college will benefit from learning to organize their own schedules, as well as learning to make, record, and follow through with appointments.

USING CAMPUS RESOURCES.

College students are expected to use campus resources and build time in their schedules to access them. This can include the library, fitness center, and student center. Given this freedom, many students benefit from additional instruction and practice on how to incorporate these resources into their schedules. Helping high school students use typical school and community resources while in school (e.g., library or media center, local fitness club, school clubs) helps prepare them to use similar resources in college.

PLANNING FREE TIME.

College students will often say their free time with friends is a highlight of their time at college. This can include being in clubs together, attending campus events, or just hanging out in the dorms, at the student center, or in the dining center. Planning for these interactions takes practice with both social and organizational skills. Students in high school benefit from opportunities to learn and rehearse these skills with peers in school, at home, and in the community. We recommend planning weekend activities with friends, joining clubs, or volunteering in the community. Students can also benefit from learning to plan the transportation needed to attend these events. All these activities give students opportunities to learn more about what they like to do with their free time.

There are many skills needed to successfully navigate a college experience. Students with intellectual disabilities can begin to practice and grow these skills of campus participation, academic preparation, and personal responsibility while they are in high school. By intentionally incorporating strategies for postsecondary preparation into students' typical school day and in their community activities, educators and families can better prepare students for college success.

PLANNING FOR FREE TIME AT COLLEGE TAKES PRACTICE WITH BOTH SOCIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS.

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