

Facts about Disability Disclosure in the Admissions Process

Excerpt from the book Seven Steps to College Success: A Pathway for Students with Disabilities, 3rd Edition by Elizabeth C. Hamblet (2023).

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Facts about Disability Disclosure in the Admissions Process

A student may hear all sorts of things about the admissions process and the role disability disclosure may play in it. They may wonder what colleges are allowed to ask them, what information their high school might share, and whether they have to disclose their disability if they hope to receive support for it once they enroll.

Disability Inquiries Are Not Allowed

Disclosure of a disability is totally voluntary in the college admissions process. Colleges can't ask students about this, except in a very rare situation.

At § 104.42[4], Section 504 says colleges "may not make preadmission inquiry as to whether an applicant for admission is a handicapped person but after admission, may make inquiries on a confidential basis as to handicaps that may require accommodation." This means that

colleges can't ask an applicant whether they have a disability before they are admitted, but once a student gets in and enrolls, their college can contact them to let them know about the availability of disability accommodations.

There is one kind of circumstance where a college is allowed to ask students if they have a disability at the point that they are applying. At 104.42 [c], the law says colleges that are "taking remedial action to correct the effects of past discrimination" can do this. A college that has previously gotten in trouble for excluding students with disabilities and is now trying to make up for that past discrimination can ask students if they have a disability, presumably so that it can make sure it admits some students who do. Examples of colleges being found to have discriminatory admissions practices are so unusual it's not worth diving into the details.

School Documents May Disclose Information

As part of the application process, the high school guidance department will send a copy of a student's transcript (list of courses the student took and grades earned each year) to each college to which they apply. They'll also send a high school profile or description. Students should know what these documents might or might not reveal.

Transcripts

When admissions staffers look at a student's application, they review the transcript the high school has sent. Students might wonder what it could say about them and their disability.

The U.S. Department of Education says, "...it would be a violation of Section 504 and Title II for a student's transcript to indicate that a student has received special education or a related service or that the student has a disability." It does say, though, that "a transcript may indicate that a student took classes with a modified or alternate education curriculum. This is consistent with the transcript's purpose of informing postsecondary institutions and prospective employers of a student's academic credentials and achievements."

What this means is that parents shouldn't keep their student from having an IEP or 504 plan in high school for fear that this would be noted on their transcript. Don't keep them from having the accommodations and services they need. If the team is considering placing a student in a modified class that would be noted on the transcript, they should make sure the student understands this.

And it also counters another myth you may have heard that is a variation on this idea - that a student who has an IEP should be moved to a 504 plan before their senior year because (as the thinking behind this seems to be) colleges view 504 plans more favorably. Admissions directors interviewed for this book were unanimous in saying they'd not seen transcripts indicating that students had had IEPs, 504 plans, or used

accommodations, and they're not allowed to ask about disabilities in the process, so the kind of plan students had wouldn't even be a consideration.

Even so, students who don't want to disclose their disability might wonder how admissions staffers would respond to the appearance of a learning disabilities support class on their transcript. (1) Again, directors insisted that they do not use information about a student's disability to include or exclude them.

What they said is that their primary focus in looking at transcripts is to check whether a student took the courses that would give them the preparation needed to do well at their college. Georgia Tech's Clark remarked that because his is a STEM school (meaning it's focused on science, technology, engineering, and math), the admissions process focuses on the student's performance in classes they took in related to those areas.

[Read Step 5 of the book to read more comments from admissions deans.]

Disclosure is Not Required for Students to Later Seek Services

Students should know that they don't have to disclose their disability anywhere in their college application in order to register for accommodations once they are admitted and enroll. Colleges can't

preclude a student from registering with DS if they didn't mention their disability before they were admitted. (2) They shouldn't feel any pressure to disclose before that time.

Admissions Doesn't Review Applications for Level 3 Programs

As discussed in Step 5, colleges have different timelines for when a student can complete the application for a Level 3 program. They may have to wait until they're admitted to the college, or they may be able to complete it at the same time they submit their application for admission to the college. If they can apply to the college and the special program at the same, the disability paperwork will likely only go to the program; Admissions staff won't review it. This means that a student could apply to a Level 3 program without indicating in their admission application that they have a disability.

No Data is Publicly Available on Admission Rates for Students with Disabilities

You may wonder whether there are statistics showing the college acceptance/rejection rates for students with disabilities that might help them decide whether to disclose. While colleges may publish these rates for their overall pool of applicants, none publishes specific rates for students with disabilities (and it's unlikely that they privately analyze their data for this kind of specific point). Even if a college did want to look at this, remember that they could only count the students who disclosed

their disability in their application. They would have no way of knowing whether some of the students who applied had a disability they didn't disclose; they could only count those who did.

1. An example of such a class might include a period each day where students earn credit by working with a special educator on developing learning strategies or getting pre-teaching or supplemental instruction for their general education classes.

2. Remember that disclosing their disability in their application doesn't equal registering with DS, so even if a student does this, they still must follow the registration process anyway once they enroll (if they want to use accommodations).