

Navigating Post-Secondary with a Learning Disability

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Transitioning to post-secondary education is a significant milestone for any student. But for those with Learning Disabilities (LDs), it can come with unique challenges. Unlike high school, where support is often built into the system, post-secondary schooling requires students to take charge of their own learning and advocate for their needs. Understanding the available accommodations, institutional expectations, and key steps to success can make all the difference. In this article, we'll explore how students with LDs can navigate post-secondary education with confidence and achieve their academic goals.

How do students with an LD differ from students without an LD?

Students with LDs often approach education differently than their peers. While a typical student may be able to follow traditional learning methods and manage coursework without additional assistance, students with LDs require accommodations to support their learning. These accommodations are designed to remove barriers that might otherwise prevent a student from demonstrating their true abilities. They are not "special treatment", but rather a way to level the playing field. They ensure that students with disabilities are able to have the fairest opportunity to succeed. Without accommodations, students with disabilities would be at a disadvantage. Just like a wheelchair ramp allows access to a building for individuals with mobility impairments, learning accommodations provide necessary support for students with LDs to succeed in academic environments.

What expectations will a post-secondary institution have?

Unlike high school, where teachers and parents play a significant role in ensuring students receive support, post-secondary institutions expect students to take greater responsibility and independence for their learning. Here are some key expectations that post-secondary will have for your child:

- 1. Self Advocacy:** In post-secondary, students must seek out support on their own. This means they will need to become comfortable and confident in asking for help, talking to their professors, and working with their classmates. Students should be aware of how their LD affects them and what strategies work best for them. This self-awareness will help them communicate their needs effectively.
- 2. Time Management and Organization:** Post-secondary students are expected to plan their schedules, keep track of deadlines, and balance coursework with other responsibilities. They are also expected to independently create and manage their own timetables, courseload, and ensure they are taking all of the required courses to obtain their degree.
- 3. Independence:** Professors will not remind students to complete assignments or offer extra help unless a student asks. Students will need to be proactive in accessing resources and staying on top of their workload.

What accommodations will students with Learning Disabilities get?

Post-secondary institutions are required by law to accommodate students with disabilities. These accommodations will help level the playing field without compromising academic standards. It is also important to note that accommodations cannot be unreasonable. For

example, accommodations at the post-secondary level cannot change or “modify” course content, ask the instructors to teach a course or content differently, or accommodate for something that is not a diagnosis (e.g., test anxiety). While accommodations can vary by institution and individual need, some common supports include:

1. **Extra time on Tests/Exams:** Many students with LDs process information more slowly and benefit from extra time on exams. Extra time is typically 1.5-2x more than the designated time.
2. **Alternative Testing Arrangements:** This might include writing exams in a quiet room or using assistive technology (e.g., typing, spell check) to complete the test.
3. **Permission to Record Class:** This may be helpful for students who have difficulty keeping pace with lecture or writing notes quickly and accurately.
4. **Books in Alternative Formats:** This may be useful for students who have difficulty reading textbooks, such as accessing audiobooks or a combined format.
5. **Class Notes/Slides:** Students may be able to access detailed notes from lectures. However, some courses, such as discussion based courses, may not be able to provide notes.

What steps do students with LDs need to take to ensure they are successful in post-secondary education and get the accommodations they require?

In high school, a student with an LD has an Individualized Program Plan (IPP) with an education code used to provide them with access to appropriate interventions and accommodations in the school setting. In post-secondary, the student will still receive appropriate accommodations based on their needs, however the process is different. Post-secondary institutions require students to take the lead in their learning. Here are the key steps they will need to follow upon getting accepted into a school:

1. **Gather Documentation:** Post-secondary institutions require proof of an LD. This usually means providing a recent psychoeducational assessment. However, some institutions will accept older documentation or a doctor's note depending on what the diagnosis is (e.g., a doctor's note can provide services for ADHD) or the circumstance. It is best to plan ahead and get a reassessment if your child's psychoeducational assessment is older than 5 years in order to update services for them and grant them the most appropriate and useful accommodations for their unique learning profile.
2. **Contact the Accessibility Services Office at the Chosen Institute:** Each post-secondary school has an office dedicated to supporting students with disabilities. The Accessibility Services office will help to facilitate policy and build a bridge between faculty and students. Students should contact this office as soon as they accept their offer of admission - ideally several months before starting school - to begin the process.
3. **Be Prepared on What to Say:** Students should know what their Learning Disability (or other diagnosis) is, what their specific learning needs are, and what accommodations work best for them. They should have the language and knowledge to share this information with their advisor.
4. **Meet with an Accessibility Advisor:** Once a meeting is scheduled, the student will meet with the Accessibility Advisor independently to discuss their needs and determine what accommodations are appropriate. Don't forget to bring the documentation!
5. **Arrange for Accommodations:** Accommodations do not happen automatically. Students need to work with their Accessibility Advisor and will need to self advocate with their professors. Accessibility Advisors will not share any information directly with

professors and faculty. It is up to the student to share their accommodation letter with each professor/instructor.

6. **Follow Through on Booking Exam Accommodations:** Students will need to book quiet rooms for exams or assistive technology as appropriate.
7. **Use Campus Resources:** Post-secondary institutions offer a variety of resources and services to help students. This can include academic advising, writing services, and counselling.

A Learning Disability does not have to stand in the way of post-secondary education. While there are challenges, there are also many resources and accommodations available to support students. The most important factor for student success is their ability to **self-advocate**. Students must take charge of their education independently by getting accommodations in place, communicating with professors and faculty, and using the available resources.

As a parent, you can help by encouraging independence, supporting the transition process and reminding your child that having an LD does not define or limit their potential. With the right approach, they can achieve their academic and career goals just like any other student.

Resources:

Alberta Human Rights Commission- Duty to Accommodate Students with Disabilities

<https://albertahumanrights.ab.ca/media/cumfoote/duty-to-accommodate-students-with-disabilities.pdf>

How College Students with LD can Self-Advocate:

<https://idaamerica.org/info/how-college-students-with-ld-can-self-advocate/#:~:text=It%20means%20explaining%20your%20learning,disability%2C%20strengths%2C%20and%20needs.>

Advocating for Yourself in Post-Secondary

<https://ldadhdnetwork.ca/advocating-for-yourself-in-post-secondary/>

Learning Disabilities/ADHD Network: Transitioning to PostSecondary Series

<https://www.youtube.com/@learningdisabilitiesadhdne6479>

Self Advocacy Overview:

https://canlearnsociety.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/LC_Self-Advocacy_N2.pdf

Landmark College: High School to Higher Education Transition Series

<https://www.landmark.edu/research-and-training/blog/actions-to-take-in-high-school>