

INSPIRING POSSIBILITIES

Going to College: Tips for Students with Visual Impairments

College is full of new experiences. You will meet new people, learn new things, and perhaps be away from home for the first time. As an individual with a visual impairment, you may be wondering how you're going to do it all. How will you pick a good school? How will you find your books and do your homework? How are you going to find your way to class? Will you be able to make friends with other students? This handout will answer these and other questions.

First Steps

The first step in transitioning to college is finding the best school for you. Don't worry; you don't have to do it alone. Your parents, school counselors, and teacher for the visually impaired will help you choose a school that meets your needs and goals, and best fits with what you want to learn in college.

If you and your parents are able to take a college campus tour, you can begin to develop a good feel for the school's atmosphere. You also can stop by the office for students with disabilities, which will be an important resource for you. This office provides supports to students with disabilities so they will have the same opportunities to complete their education as students without disabilities. Talking with department staff, and finding out what kinds of services they provide, may help you decide about attending that school.

After Acceptance

Many schools invite new students to an orientation before the academic year begins. If you go, you'll receive another tour of the campus and may also have an opportunity to register for courses. Taking this opportunity is a good idea because it may allow you to obtain materials in advance that you'll need for class.

As soon as you know which courses you'll be taking, set up a meeting with the office of disability services, even if you don't know exactly what kind of help you'll need. It's much easier to obtain needed services before school starts than in the middle of the term. (Tip: You'll need medical proof of your visual impairment from your regular doctor or an ophthalmologist before you can register for disability services.)

Accommodations

If you decide you need disability services, the office of disability support services staff will help you determine what accommodations you will need. Accommodations may include such things as an aide to accompany you to class to take notes and assist in labs if necessary. In addition to computers, State Services can provide many types of AT, including text-to-speech software such as Jaws for Windows or Window Eyes, and text enlargement programs such as Zoom-Text.

Other pieces of AT may be needed as well. For example, your youth might need a note-taking device, such as a Packmate or BrailleNote. Both are devices with either a braille or standard computer keyboard, text-to-speech capabilities, and a braille display, which provides alternative access to the material. A tape recorder may also be needed. Your disability support staff will write a letter to your professors requesting the accommodations you need. This important letter provides documented proof that you have a disability and that the school is obligated to help you.

In some cases, support staff will deliver the letters for you, but at some universities, students deliver the letters themselves. Doing so can be a challenge for students who

are uncomfortable speaking with new people, but this early contact with your professors gives you three benefits.

First, it allows you to meet with your professors outside of the class setting when they won't be as busy and will be able to listen more attentively to you. Second, it gives you a chance to know the professor and be specific about accommodations you will need. Finally, it helps you further develop self-advocacy skills you will need in college and in life.

You may find that some, or perhaps all, of your professors are unavailable before the term starts. If that's the case, don't worry. Professors usually have office hours once the term begins, and you can meet during this time. You also can talk to the professor the first day before or after class. Be sure the letter of accommodation is delivered to the professor, or to his or her office, no later than the first week of class.

Materials for Class

Once you have been accepted to a school, spoken with the department of disability services, and delivered any necessary letters of accommodation to your professors, the next step is to collect your syllabi (course plans and curricula) and books for all your courses.

Ideally, you want to obtain these materials ahead of time and give copies to the department of disability services so the staff has time to convert them into an accessible format. Sometimes professors may not decide on the books for their courses until shortly before classes begin and may not hand out the syllabus until the first day of class.

If you find yourself in a situation like this, don't worry. Here are some steps you can take.

First, e-mail your professors, explain that you have a visual impairment, and request that they e-mail their syllabi to you so you have time to have it converted to an accessible format. You can find their contact information in a faculty directory either on the college website or by calling the departments in which they are located. If you don't have access to the Internet or a computer, call the professors and ask them to mail a syllabus to you. If you are still unable to obtain a syllabus before class starts, you will have to wait until the first day and receive one along with the rest of the students. Although not ideal, the situation gives you an opportunity to learn from new challenges.

Books and Other Materials

Depending on your level of vision loss, you may need to have your books converted into electronic format or Braille.

Once you have your list of required books, go to the college bookstore, purchase or rent your books, then bring them to the office of disability services as soon as possible.

If any of your books aren't available before class begins, don't worry. Your fellow students may be in the same situation, and most professors are understanding if students don't have all of the materials the first day or so.

If materials aren't available before class begins, it's a good idea to explain the situation and assure your professor that you will obtain the material as soon as you can. Although it may take a couple of weeks for your materials to be converted into an accessible format, you can use a reader provided by the disability services office to keep you current in class.

On Campus

Once you arrive on campus, you will probably feel the same way most of your fellow freshmen do: concerned and excited. Like many students, you may be away from home for the first time, and things can seem difficult when they are unfamiliar. Your parents and others can help make your adjustment to campus easier.

When you were in high school, a mobility instructor may have taught you how to travel independently. This instructor probably taught you how to ask for directions, cross streets, pay attention to traffic, plan routes, and use public transportation. You may want to ask this instructor, or someone he or she recommends, to meet with you on campus before classes start to familiarize you with the locations of your classroom buildings.

If such onsite training is unavailable, all of the skills you have learned from your instructor are going to be invaluable on campus. Once you arrive, ask your parents to help you find the locations of your classroom buildings. It is best to familiarize yourself with these routes as soon as possible so you are not lost on your first day of class.

Most new students do get lost, especially if the campus is large. The most important thing to remember in this situation is to not panic. If you get lost, the easiest thing to do is to ask someone immediately to either take you to where you need to go or give you directions. You may also want to carry a cell phone in case you need to call a friend, a taxi, or campus security.

One other good rule to follow is to remember landmarks. Depending on your visual impairment, you may be able to see distinctive buildings or sculptures that you could use to orient yourself. If you cannot see at all, you might be able to

use auditory landmarks such as a fountain or the bells from a clock tower. However you use landmarks, they can be a valuable tool in navigating the campus.

Socializing

College isn't just about studying and making good grades. It's also about meeting interesting people and socializing. Incoming students are encouraged to attend many events, especially during the first week of classes. Individual dormitories may also set up events such as pizza parties or movie nights. You will also meet students in your classes and, if you form friendships with them, you can socialize outside of class. Colleges, especially large universities, usually have many nearby restaurants and coffee shops where you and your friends can meet. It's important to become familiar with these locations so you can travel to them independently.

You may be afraid at first, thinking no one will talk to you. Don't assume that will be the case. You are surrounded by many people you don't know and who don't know you. They may be more interested in what you are studying or where you're from than your visual impairment. If you act like yourself and let your fellow students see who you really are, you should soon make new friends.

Conclusion

Going to college can be a challenge for anyone, and it can be especially so if you are visually impaired. Remember that you have many people around you who are willing to help, and you should feel comfortable asking for help. College can teach you many things, including how to advocate for yourself as an individual with a disability. Also, remember to have fun and enjoy yourself. College can be one of the best times of your life.