



## College: A realistic option for students with learning disabilities

Students with learning disabilities (LD) are now enrolling in postsecondary education at approximately the same rate as students without disabilities. Approximately 67% of both students with and without LD have enrolled in some form of postsecondary education within 8 years of leaving high school. However, these students continue to differ in the types of postsecondary institutions in which they enroll, as well as in their graduation rates. Understanding these differences and planning accordingly may help ensure that college remains an increasingly realistic option for students with LD.

### Enrollment versus Graduation

The 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA mandates that students with IEPs be provided with transition planning services beginning no later than 16 years of age (as opposed to 14 years under the previous version), and that postsecondary education must be considered as a goal for all students.

In addition, there is an increased awareness of the impact of postsecondary education on future employment and earnings. By the year 2020, 65% of jobs will require a postsecondary credential, and individuals with a bachelor's degree are estimated to earn twice as much over the course of their lifetime as individuals with a high school diploma or less.

It has also been demonstrated that when individuals with LD obtain a postsecondary degree, their employment rates and earnings are comparable to individuals without disabilities.

Therefore, larger numbers of students with LD are identifying postsecondary education as a goal and enrolling. Nevertheless, students with LD continue to differ from their non-disabled peers in their patterns of enrollment and graduation. Although both students with and without LD are similarly likely to enroll in any postsecondary school (66.8% vs. 67%, respectively), students with LD are more likely to enroll in vocational schools (31.4% vs. 16.7%) or community colleges (40.8% vs. 21.2%), and less likely to enroll in 4-year colleges (15.6% vs. 37.4%). Furthermore, students with LD are less likely to have graduated from a postsecondary school within 8 years of leaving high school (41% vs. 52%). These outcomes may reflect differences in transition planning during high school and differences in support after high school.

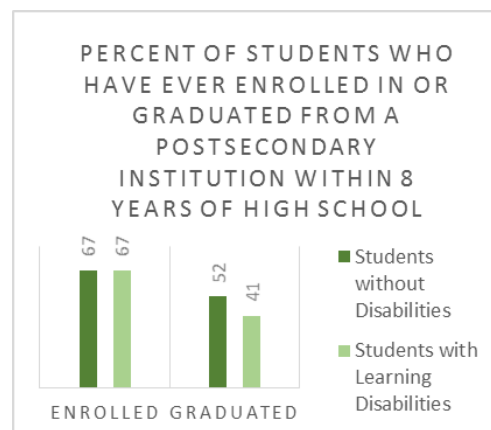


Figure 1: Results from The Post-High School Outcomes of Young Adults with Disabilities up to 8 Years after High School: A Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study -2 (NLST2)

## Stumbling blocks

### Less academic rigor

- If transition planning is not begun until age 16, it may be too late for the student to take the necessary courses in time for college admission. For example, special education teams may recommend that the student take less rigorous math classes. However, if the student later decides to pursue postsecondary education, he or she may be required to spend valuable time and money taking remedial courses before becoming eligible for credit-bearing classes, or perhaps his or her academic record may eliminate the option of attending certain colleges entirely.

### Inadequate documentation of disability

- Colleges are not required to adhere to the mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA). Instead, colleges are bound by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504. As a result, college documentation of disability focuses on whether the functional impact of the student's disability warrants reasonable accommodations.
- In the meantime, high schools do not always document disabilities in a manner that fulfills the requirements of the student's preferred college or university. Although IDEA requires postsecondary education be considered as part of transition planning, it does not require high schools to update documentation of disability specifically tailored toward institutions of higher education. Therefore, a lack of timely or appropriate documentation can greatly affect the student's eligibility for services, or force the student to pay for the necessary evaluations out of pocket.

### Lower self-awareness and self-advocacy

- Postsecondary provision of protections and supports relies on student self-disclosure. That is to say that if the student does not speak up on his or her behalf to request accommodations and provide adequate documentation of disability, he or she will be unable to access disability services.  
Unfortunately, not all students have adequate awareness of the nature of their disability. According to the NLTS2, 69% of students with LD reported that they do not consider themselves to have a disability, and subsequently did not request accommodations in college. An additional 7% are aware of their disability but do not disclose it. Overall, only 17% of students with LD receive accommodations and supports through their college. Furthermore, parents may or may not be able to intervene on their child's behalf due to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), so it is critical that students with disabilities develop an awareness of their needs and develop the skills needed to successfully advocate for themselves.

## What We Know

- Students with LD require early and comprehensive planning for the transition to postsecondary education.
- Transition teams should ensure that the student has adequate coursework and documentation of disability to satisfy college requirements.
- Students must learn to self-disclose and self-advocate in order to receive appropriate accommodations.

## What can be done?

Successful postsecondary transition planning requires early and comprehensive collaboration between students, families, secondary special education teams, secondary school counselors, and postsecondary student services.

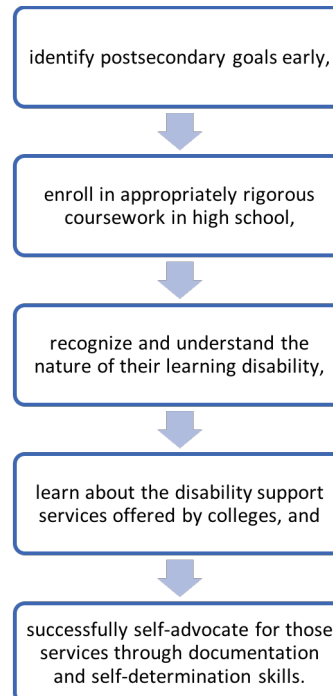
Transition planning teams should assess a student's interests, needs, and abilities, and help match them to colleges that can provide them with the necessary supports. Some suggestions to consider:

- Begin transition planning early (preferably by 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade) in order to ensure a satisfactorily rigorous course of study for college readiness.
- Maintain an updated summary of performance (SOP) that the student can present to disability service offices, ensuring that they provide acceptable documentation to receive accommodations at the student's colleges of interest.

- Actively involve the student in the development of the SOP and help the student to develop self-determination skills so that he or she is prepared to disclose the disability, self-advocate for accommodations, and set personal and academic goals.
- Match the services provided by the colleges of interest (assistive technology, mental health counseling, coaching, study skills workshops, etc.) to the student's level of need.

## Conclusions

Students with LD can have a successful college experience with the right planning and communication. Parents, counselors, and students should work together to ensure that the students are able to:



## Recommended Resources

- Foss, D. (2013). *Your complete guide to college success: How to study smart, achieve your goals, and enjoy campus life*. APA, Washington, DC
- Reiff, H. B. (2007). *Self-advocacy skills for students with learning disabilities: Making it happen in college and beyond*. National Professional Resources Inc./Dude Publishing.
- National College Access Network. [www.collegeaccess.org](http://www.collegeaccess.org)

## References

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