



Ten Questions to Ask Disability Services *Before You Apply to College*

After considering academic, social, cultural, and financial factors, there's one more thing that students with learning differences (LDs) should do to ensure a good college fit: Interview each college's Office of Disability Services. This is the office in charge of LD accommodations for every college or university. When choosing where to apply, it's important that you make an informed choice with your specific learning style in mind.

Here are some questions to ask *before* you apply:

1. How current does my LD evaluation need to be?

For the most part, Disability Services require your evaluations be no more than three years old. It's likely you had them updated for the PSAT. But if the last time you had an LD evaluation was in 9th grade or before, you need an updated evaluation.

2. Does my IEP or 504 Plan count instead of an assessment?

NO! Some Disability Services Offices may inform their decisions using your IEP or 504 Plan, however they are not legally obligated to follow these plans.

3. What Assistive Technology is available?

Most colleges offer a variety of Assistive Technology options, so be prepared for this question: "*What exactly do you need to support your learning difference?*" If you use audio books or speech-to-text tech, know which application you prefer. If you need a scribe, peer notes, or professor notes, be sure you can support why that is helpful for you. Do you use noise-canceling headphones or need a private room for testing? Prepare a list of all accommodations you may need prior to interviewing Disability Services.

4. Is there an additional application for accommodations and, if so, is there a fee?

Some campuses require an application and/or additional fee above and beyond tuition for LD services. Some don't. Some schools have limited space in these programs.

Example: Texas Tech has a great program for students with learning differences called *TECHniques*. But... just because you get accepted to the university does not mean they have room for you in the program. *TECHniques* sets a cap on the number of students they admit. And yes, there is an additional program fee.

5. How does your Office of Disability Services work with students?

Disability Services Offices vary wildly in how they work with students. Some schools have a specific counselor assigned to each student to support their entire college journey. Some have student staff members that direct students to the various campus support services like a traffic cop. Others have counselors available for drop-in meetings and to assist in an ad hoc way. Be sure you think about your needs and make sure you are getting the level of support you need to be successful. For example, each new student at Maryville University in the St. Louis suburbs is assigned a Life Coach at orientation. This coach supports his or her student's progress through graduation and sometimes beyond. Many students might find that to be very useful, some might consider it overkill. Be honest with yourself.

6. How many Disability Services counselors or case managers do you have? And how many students do you serve?

Just like the student/professor ratio, the importance of this question depends on your comfort level. So, think about it. How much help will you need? A lot? Be sure the ratio of students to counsellors is low. If you feel like you just need a bit here and there, great! The ratio can be higher.

7. How are my accommodations communicated to my professors? And what is my recourse if they don't comply?

Unfortunately, there are still some "old school" professors who feel that allowing accommodations to their LD students is not fair their non-LD students. Some go as far as calling it "cheating." This is illegal. But it still happens. That's why it's so important for you to know your rights and be prepared to self-advocate.

8. Will you waive the language requirement?

Many students with LD (especially dyslexia) are allowed to forego the language requirement in high school. This is not always the case in college. Be sure to ask. You would not want to end up at a college where it is required and struggle academically.

9. May I get early access to registration? What is the procedure?

Often (but not always) early registration is offered to students through the Office of Disability Services. Be sure to ask, so you can take advantage of this non-stressful, time-saving service.

10. What tutoring and coaching options are available?

Colleges and Universities have many offices that support student success. From library research support to essay writing labs to physics tutoring to internship prep – if you need help with something, there is an office for that. Disability Services is your quarterback. They call the plays on your behalf. If you are having trouble with anything, they can point you in the right direction.

A Cautionary Tale:

Before you apply to a college, determine whether the school is even interested in supporting students with learning differences. A surefire way to find out is to make an appointment and visit the Offices of Disability Services when touring campuses.

I recently visited a campus Disability Service office (sorry, I can't tell you which college) and it was located – not kidding here – in the basement, past the boiler room in the dimly lit, cement-floored corner of one of their “vintage” buildings. As if those of us with LDs don't have enough self-esteem issues, right? Banished to the basement? It didn't even have elevator access. I asked the nice secretary, “What about students with mobility issues?” and she answered, “Huh. I don't know? I guess they wouldn't apply here.”

This is not the only case of subconscious discrimination I've encountered. The Office of Disability Services should be your shelter in the storm – a safe place of acceptance to learn and grow. If you don't feel the love, chances are they don't either. Move on!