

# Off to College: Tips for Parents of Students with Visual Impairments

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College is an exciting time of life for both parents and youth, but it also can be stressful, especially when the student has a visual impairment. This guide can help you prepare your son or daughter with a vision impairment for success in postsecondary education.

## Find the Right School

For students with and without disabilities, the process of choosing a college usually begins in junior year of high school. It typically includes meeting with a school guidance counselor for advice on options that meet the student's academic abilities and goals. You and your child with a vision impairment also may want to seek additional advice from a counselor at the local branch of the state agency that serves the blind. Some states, including Minnesota, have Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs that serve persons with any disability, while others have separate agencies serving consumers with visual impairments. A counselor from VR (called State Services in this handout) can help you draw up a plan that addresses transition and accommodation issues. He or she also can recommend services and resources that might be helpful in college and provide materials and assistive technology (AT) that support the plan.

Once you and your student have identified prospective colleges, the next step is to explore the disability services and accommodations each provides. Accommodations are important because they level the academic playing field and give your student an equal opportunity to succeed in college. Each college or university will vary in its capacity to effectively provide supports to students with visual impairments. Although public universities typically offer more accommodations to students with visual

impairment than smaller schools, it is wise to investigate all prospective colleges to make sure they have the resources your child will need before you commit to a particular school.

## Contact the College's Department of Disabilities Services

As soon as your student has accepted a college's offer to attend, he or she should set up a meeting with the school's department of disability services. This office may be called by different names, such as Student Disability Services, and is designed to help students secure necessary academic accommodations before classes begin. Your youth will need to provide proof of visual impairment, such as a medical report from an ophthalmologist or other doctor, at this meeting.

A disabilities services specialist can then act as an advocate on behalf of your student. This person can help your youth do such things as draft letters to professors, explaining the accommodations that will be needed in class. (Although professors must provide these accommodations, no course or curriculum may be modified for any student.)

The department of disability services can provide other accommodations as well, including:

- alternative formats, such as Braille or large-print exams
- a person who will accompany your student to class to take notes and assist in classes with a lab, if necessary
- conversion of books and other materials into accessible formats.

You may want to attend the first meeting between the department staff and your student so you can be familiar with the services your youth will receive.

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## Obtain Assistive Technology (AT)

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Although the college's disability services department may have AT available in its office, your student will need his or her own laptop computer and AT for daily use. You can purchase them yourself or have them provided by State Services, if appropriate.

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 and Magic.

Your student may need other pieces of AT as well. For example, if a professor does not allow students to bring laptop computers into lectures, your student might need a note-taking device, such as a Packmate or Braille-note. Both machines are computers with either a Braille or standard computer keyboard, text-to-speech capabilities, and a Braille display, which provides alternative access to the material. Your student also may want to use a tape recorder.

Keep in mind that assistive technology changes rapidly. Every year technological improvements are made that allow students to do more for themselves in the classroom. Consult your State Services counselor or local assistive technology resource for the most current products.

## Explore the Campus

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One of the most stressful aspects of transitioning to college can be the size and unfamiliarity of the college campus. Here are four tips to help your youth become familiar with the campus before school starts.

- *Plan Ahead:* Obtain a copy of your child's class schedule in advance so you and your student can become familiar with the locations of the classroom buildings.
- *Seek Help:* If your child has had an orientation and mobility instructor in the past, you may want to have that person orient your student to the campus.
- *Connect with Community:* Find the grocery stores, coffee shops, book stores, restaurants, and other locations where students congregate. Doing so will give your youth the ability to be social outside of class—and that ability can remove a large part of the transitional stress.
- *Warm to the Dorm:* Upon your arrival, meet with some of the dormitory staff so they can be made aware of your student's disability. Afterward, explore

the building or ask a staff member or a returning student familiar with the building to show you around. Be sure to locate the cafeteria, bathrooms, and bathing facilities if separate from the rest of the bathroom. Your student also will need to know how to travel independently from the lobby of the dormitory to his or her room. Roommates can be helpful with this task.

## Conclusion

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The most helpful thing any parent can do when preparing a student for college is to offer support. You can do that by involving yourself in the transition process, helping with the choice of schools, attending the first meeting at the disability services department, working with counselors from State Services and the college's disability services office, and helping your student become familiar with his or her new surroundings.

College offers lots of lessons. You can teach an important one by showing your youth how to find services, resources, and supports and be a successful self-advocate.