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## Making the Grade: A Workbook for Students with Psychiatric Disabilities

### This isn't High School Anymore! From the IDEA to the ADA

Going to college is more than just changing schools, like when we go from junior high to high school. Going to college is, in many ways like walking over a bridge from adolescence to young adulthood. Colleges have different expectations, and these often require you to be in charge. For example, many classes will only have a mid-term and a final exam, and it is expected that you are doing your homework each week without someone standing over you to make sure it's done. If you're not keeping up on your own, you will have a hard time passing exams.

This shift in responsibility is especially true if you've received services in high school, and want to continue to receive any type of classroom adjustment, also known as accommodations, in college.

In high school, services and accommodations were provided under a law known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The law says that the *school* is obligated to determine if a student is disabled and, if so, to provide all needed accommodations to help that student be as successful as possible. Under this law, you were "entitled" to the services, and the school had the responsibility to make sure that you got the needed services. College is very different!

Once you leave high school, the IDEA law no longer applies to you. Instead, the Americans with Disabilities Act, (ADA) determines what classroom adjustments you might be entitled to, as well as the process for getting these accommodations. Under the ADA, the responsibility for meeting your disability-related needs lies with you (and your family) and the college doesn't have any of the IDEA mandates that your high school was required to follow.

**Let's look at some key differences:**

**The “Right: to an Education:**

Under IDEA, education is considered a “right” and must be provided in an “appropriate” setting. This may mean a special education class or tract, or being allowed to attend a specialized high school, etc. The high school is responsible to find or create ways to provide you an education and accommodate your disability needs in any way possible.

The ADA does not create a “right” to an education. You must demonstrate that, despite your disability, you can meet the standard requirements of college. For example, you must be able to attend classes, do homework and take exams like all other students. The ADA, however attempts to “level the playing field.” The ADA requires “reasonable” academic adjustments or accommodations, to put you on the same footing as other students. So if your disability affects your ability to concentrate, you might be allowed an extended time to complete exams. Or if you get overwhelmed by the stimulations of the classroom, you may be offered a note taker during class.

The ADA does not allow you to have an “unfair advantage” over other students. So if all students are required to take an exam, you would be required to do that as well. The line between “reasonable accommodation” or classroom adjustment that “levels the playing field” as opposed to one that gives you an “unfair advantage” over other students is not always very clear, but this is the measure colleges use to determine if an accommodation is reasonable or not. If you are not able to perform the basic tasks required of a student, you can be denied admission or be subject to standard academic failure policies because the ADA does not guarantee you the “right” to a college education.

**Getting the Ball Rolling:**

As a college student and a young adult, you will be expected to do what needs to be done to initiate the request for initial accommodations, and follow through with any steps needed to provide required documentation, communicate with professors about accommodations and/or maintain accommodations over semesters or school years.

Therefore, first and foremost, you have to disclose that you have a disability to the Disability Services (DS) office or other office on your campus that serves students with disabilities. You are the one who has to get the ball rolling. Even if your parents visit the school in advance, you, the student, are still going to be the one who is ultimately charged with fulfilling any requirements by the Disability Services office.

To “document” or prove that you have a disability, you may need to get testing done (or updated), see a doctor to get a medical note, or see other professionals to show that you have a disability and to specify the accommodations that would be helpful to you. Under the ADA, you will have to pay for any of these appointments or tests. In high school, it was the school’s responsibility. In college, it becomes yours.

You may decide that you don’t want to disclose your disability or work with the DS office. You have every right in college to choose this, and no one will search you out and try to dissuade you from your choice. It’s important that you get the information you need to make an informed choice about disclosing or not. If you choose not to disclose or work with a disability services office, you may forfeit your rights under the ADA. The ADA requires that the college provide reasonable accommodations, which can only be done after you’ve described the way your disability impacts your abilities. Therefore, the college can’t be held responsible for not providing something that wasn’t asked for.

The DS process in college is there as a tool for you to use when and if you think it will serve you. You are the decision-maker. As with all decisions, you want to weigh and balance the pros and cons as you make your choices.

### **Courses and College Plan:**

There are no IEPs, PSTPs, 501s or any other variation of an educational plan in place for you in college. The IDEA required your high school to determine your educational path and make transitional plans for you. In college, you choose and register for your courses, determine your major, and pick your schedule. In other words, you write your own IEP.

This is not to say that you have to do it all alone. You will have an advisor to consult with. Many colleges also have a general college advising office, where you can talk to people about your plans. You may find that you have a professor that you can talk to and she or he may provide guidance as well.

There are many resources available to students on-campus and you will continue to have your off-campus supports, such as your family and friends. The key difference is that you need to initiate asking for assistance and not always just rely on yourself to know all the answers. We all need to ask for help, and it is a skill that will serve you well, not only in college, but throughout your life.

## **In Summary**

As you move from high school to college, the laws that address disability-related needs change to reflect your changing status from teenager to young adult. You will have many tools available to you, but you're the one who has to open the toolbox. You're in the lead.

### **The most important changes are:**

#### **Your high school under the IDEA:**

Took steps to see if you had a disability.

Arranged for testing and doctor visits to determine the exact nature of your disability.

Paid for all the testing, etc.

Provided alternative educational settings and programs to enhance your success.

Had team meetings so everyone could work together to determine the best plan or program for you.

Let your parents play a key role in in planning for your needs and procuring whatever services you needed.

Considered you a teenager.

#### **Now you, under the ADA:**

Tell your college that you have a disability.

Provide your DS office with the medical documentation to prove that you have a disability and need accommodations.

Pay yourself.

Must be able to do the tasks required of all students, such as attend classes, take exams and do homework, etc.

Seek out people to consult to determine the best plan for you, which you ultimately choose yourself.

Work with our school and others of your choosing to determine your college plan and facilitate any services needed.

Considers you an adult.