

The Big Difference: Disability Rights and Responsibilities in High School vs. College

One key step to a successful transition from high school to college is to anticipate and be prepared for the differences between the two settings. This is especially true for students with disabilities. In addition to dealing with the same transition issues that all students face, they also have the added challenge of changes in how support services are requested and arranged. In college, students must play a more active role and assume more responsibility. The chart below compares the legal rights and responsibilities in high school versus those in college.

The Differences Between Secondary & Postsecondary Disability Laws

Question	Secondary (High School)	Postsecondary (College)
What is the law?	IDEA and Section 504	ADA and Section 504 (Subpart E)
What is the intent of the law?	IDEA: To provide a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment to students with disabilities. 504: To ensure that no otherwise qualified person with a disability is denied access to, benefits of, or is subjected to discrimination in any program or activity provided by any public institution or entity.	To ensure that no otherwise qualified person with a disability will be denied access to, or the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination by any program or activity provided by any public institution or entity.
Who is covered under the law?	All infants, children and youth requiring special education services until age 21 or graduation from high school.	All qualified individuals with disabilities who meet the entry age level criteria or particular program entry criteria of the college and who can document the existence of a disability as defined by the ADA.
Who is responsible for identifying and documenting the need?	School districts are responsible for identifying, evaluating and planning educational services at no expense to the parent or individual.	Students are responsible for self-identification and for obtaining disability documentation from a professional who is qualified to assess their particular disability. They student, not the institution, assumes the cost of the evaluation.
Who is responsible for initiating service delivery?	School districts are responsible for identifying students with disabilities and providing special instruction, individualized education plans, and/or accommodations.	Students are responsible for notifying the Disability Support Services staff of their disability and of their need for accommodations. Accommodations (not special education) are provided on a semester by semester basis in order for students with disabilities to have equal access to the institution's programs, services and activities.
Who is responsible for enforcing the law?	IDEA is basically a funding statute, enforced by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services in the U.S. Department of Education. ADA/504 are civil rights statues, enforced by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), U.S. Department of Justice, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).	Section 504 (Subpart E) is a civil rights statute enforced by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), U.S. Department of Education. The ADA is also a civil rights statute enforced by the U.S. Department of Justice, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).
What about self-advocacy?	The parent or guardian is the primary advocate. Students with disabilities should learn about their disability, the importance of self-advocacy, the accommodation(s) they need, and ways to become a self-advocate.	Students must be able to communicate what their disability is, their strengths, weaknesses, how the disability impacts and functionally limits major life activities. They must be able to identify and justify any requested accommodations

Source: Kay McVey, Faculty Development Specialist, PROJECT CONNECT, Henderson State University

The Big Difference Between High School & College

Many students – especially those who do not have a family member who has been to college – think college is pretty much like high school, only bigger. But there are some very big differences. Many students who did not do well in high school “blossom” in college. Others never get used to college life and do not do as well as they did in high school. ***Much of how college will differ depends on you.***

To be prepared, it helps you to know what differences lie ahead. Though academic requirements and student life vary depending on the college you attend, there are basic differences that apply in almost every case. Here are some of the differences you can expect:

Different Treatment

Because you will probably be over 18 years old in college, you will be treated like an adult. This is because you will be an adult. As an adult, you will have to make sure you do what you're supposed to do, you will be responsible for the way you live, and you will have to meet greater expectations from others.

Different Structure

Generally, there are fewer rules and regulations imposed by others in college. You will be expected to make and stick to your own schedule, as well as keep up on all your work. Most professors do not take attendance in class – they expect you to be there to learn. And whether or not you learn is your responsibility. Many students, after a brief period of adjustment, will settle into a balanced lifestyle of work and play. Those who don't usually do not make it through their first year.

Different Responsibility

In college, you will take on more responsibility for your decision, actions, and lifestyle. This is part of being on your own. Professors and administrators will probably not give you a hard time about your clothes, your hair, or your general behavior (within bounds). But do be prepared to be held accountable for your behavior. There is no one to blame for not waking up on time, not eating properly, or not washing your clothes.

Different Expectation

People will expect more of you and expect you to develop in your own unique way in college. In high school, you are often expected to behave or perform to a minimum standard. Some people will expect you to go beyond minimal performance in college, so you can grow and develop as a person. You will also begin to realize what a great effect you can have – both positive and negative – on yourself, on others, and on the world around you. This can be both exciting and frightening.

Different Academic Subjects

In college, you will be free to explore numerous paths and interests that were simply not open to you in high school. There are more foreign languages, arts, and sciences offered in college. Subjects like philosophy and religion are also taught at college but probably not in high school.

Different Way of Teaching

Some subjects are taught differently in college. In high school, for instance, history may have been mainly names, dates, and places. You had to memorize facts and figures. In college, those facts are not nearly as important as why certain events and actions happened. In college English, less time may be spent on grammar and spelling (it is assumed you have mastered these) and more on writing creatively and criticizing literature. If you major in one of the sciences, you will find that in your junior and senior years, you may be designing your own experiments rather than doing exactly what everyone else in your class is doing. In foreign languages, you will be reading literature in its original language rather than just repeating phrases. And you may be able to work and study in another country for a semester or year.

Be open to falling in love with a subject in college that you may have disliked in high school. Two-thirds of college students graduate with a different major than the one they had in mind when they started – often because they found an old subject taught in a new and more interesting way.

Different Way of Learning

Many classes will be organized differently from the traditional high school lecture class. Some will be big lecture classes followed by small discussion groups. Some professor will have you read books, write papers, and discuss both in class. You may even have the chance to read independently with a professor or design your own research projects. Grading will be different, too. In some classes, you will have nothing but essay tests. In other, your entire grade will be determined by a single large paper or project. You may even have classes in which a group project is the primary grade.

Different Level of Competition

In high school, you are often graded on whether or not you learn certain things. For example, there are standardized tests given to show that you have achieved a minimum level in certain subjects. In college, you are often graded “on the curve,” your grade is determined more by how well you did in relation to your classmates than on a minimum knowledge base. This means there is more one-on-one competition between students. For example, receiving an 85 percent on a test in high school may have automatically been a B. In college, if most people did better than that, it could be a C or C–.

You may have been in the top 10 or 15 percent of your high school class, but at college most of your fellow students were also in the top 10 or 15 percent of their high school classes. You may have found it easy to make a 3.5 (on a 4.0 scale) grade point average in high school. Earning a 3.5 in college will take much more effort.

Different Day to Day

High school is a place you go to seven or eight hours a day, less than half the days of the year. Many colleges are set up to be your home – you will eat and sleep there, spend time off there, make new friends there, even do your laundry there. Therefore, chances are good that college will have an even greater effect on you than high school did. In fact, it will be a time in your life like no other.

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