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The Why, When, What, and How of  
Disclosure in an Academic Setting, After  
High School

Office of Disability Employment Policy

# THE WHY, WHEN, WHAT, AND HOW OF DISCLOSURE IN AN ACADEMIC SETTING, AFTER HIGH SCHOOL



*Deciding what to do after high school* is a complex decision for all youth. For starters, it is the first time additional schooling is not compulsory. You may choose to enter the work world or obtain additional training or education. Youth with disabilities are significantly less likely to start postsecondary education than are their peers without disabilities (27% of students with disabilities transition to postsecondary education compared to 68% of their peers without disabilities). A “postsecondary setting” is any educational training which takes place after high school. It includes four-year university degree programs, two-year community college programs, and vocational training programs.

If you decide to enter a postsecondary setting, you still have many choices to make: which program or school to attend; what courses to take; what extracurricular activities to be involved with; where to live, and so on. If you are a youth with a disability, your decision to enter a postsecondary setting may be even more complex. You must also consider the supports and services that you may need to be successful in the program of your choice. When you are researching programs to attend, you should consider information about how the program provides reasonable accommodations and how well students with disabilities are treated. It is a good idea to speak to current students with disabilities in the program. The school’s disability support services can put you in touch with current students.

## ■ WHY DISCLOSE IN THE POSTSECONDARY SETTING?

As a student with a disability in elementary, middle, and high school, you did not need to share information about your disability to receive accommodations because the school and your parents or guardians were there to assist you with arranging accommodations. Also, you had the support of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a law that entitles students with disabilities to receive free appropriate public education. Once you leave high school, the IDEA does not apply to you. Instead, as a person with a disability, you are covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Both of these laws require that covered individuals with disabilities must be provided with reasonable accommodations if the individual discloses a disability and the institution is a covered entity. These laws do not specify the process for obtaining accommodations in the same manner in which the IDEA does. Therefore, it is up to you to share information about your disability to make sure you receive the accommodations you need.

After high school, accommodations are usually provided by the program’s disability support service only if you disclose your disability and request accommodations. Some reasons for disclosing your disability in a postsecondary setting include:

- obtaining information about available supports and services;
- discussing academic requirements and practical components of your course of study; and
- ensuring that faculty members implement the reasonable accommodations you require in order for you to be successful in your courses.

## ■ WHEN TO DISCLOSE YOUR DISABILITY

The timing of your disclosure depends upon when you need accommodations. Generally, there are five instances where it may be important to consider disclosure.

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1. Prior to enrollment – you would disclose at this time if you needed accommodations during the application process.
2. At the time of enrollment – if you anticipate that you will need accommodations to complete your classes, it would be important to disclose at this point. Remember, you want to disclose your disability before you have trouble in a course due to lack of accommodations.
3. During your course of study – you would disclose at this point if you discover that you need accommodations while taking classes.
4. After being diagnosed – you want to disclose if you acquire a disability during your course of study and need accommodations to successfully complete the program.
5. Never – you may choose not to disclose your disability if no accommodations are needed, or if you have decided to accommodate your needs personally.

## ■ HOW TO DISCLOSE YOUR DISABILITY

Determine your own personal privacy boundaries concerning the amount and type of information you want to share with others. Pick a time when you are not rushed and can thoughtfully explain your needs to others. Remember to keep the disclosure conversation focused on your abilities and be self-determined and practical. It is also a good idea to practice talking about your disability with someone you trust.

## ■ WHAT TO DISCLOSE ABOUT YOUR DISABILITY

Programs may vary regarding the information they request from you. Below is information that you should be prepared to share with the disability support service staff.

- Information about your disability, including assessments and, if requested, documentation of your disability.
- Types of academic accommodations that have worked for you in the past.
- Types of academic accommodations you anticipate needing in the postsecondary setting.
- How your disability and other life experiences can contribute to your success in your studies.
- How your disability affects your capacity to learn and study effectively.

## ■ TO WHOM DO YOU DISCLOSE YOUR DISABILITY?

Generally, you should only disclose your disability to those individuals who have a need to know because of the accommodation process. You may consider disclosing to the program's disability support service's staff, academic advisor, directly on your application, or to an admissions officer. Some programs discourage students with disabilities from disclosing directly to faculty and staff because of student confidentiality. It is a good idea to begin by disclosing to the disability support services office to learn what the specific procedures are for your program.

## ■ RESOURCES

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. (2005). The 411 on disability disclosure: A workbook for youth with disabilities. [www.ncwd-youth.info/resources\\_&\\_Publications/411.html](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/resources_&_Publications/411.html)

Spellings, M., & Manning, J. (Revised May 2005). Students with disabilities preparing for postsecondary education: Know your rights and responsibilities. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, Washington, DC.

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