



# DISABLED GIRL'S GUIDE TO COLLEGE



DISABILITY  
EMPOWER  
NETWORK

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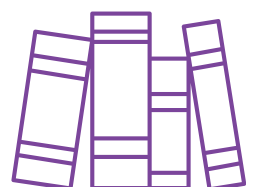
## Starting College

Starting college is a scary but exciting opportunity for everyone, but it is particularly anxiety-inducing and thrilling for students with disabilities as it brings about new challenges, experiences, and decisions that a disabled person may have never faced on their own before. This guide is for disabled girls in college, considering college, applying for college, or heading off to college very soon. It will help you know what to look for when applying to college, what factors may impact your college decision, what your rights are and how to advocate for them, how to navigate college, and what to do when you experience discrimination or other difficult experiences at college. We hope it will help you feel prepared for this exciting time in your life, and if you ever need support, we encourage you to reach out to Disability EmpowHer Network.



## Applying to College

Taking the step to apply to college is a big one, and the search for the right college can be complicated, long, and difficult. It can feel daunting to think of all the logistics and factors that may play into your decision to apply to and eventually go to a particular university, however doing this legwork ahead of time will pay off in the long run. Remember, no two people are looking for the same things in a collegiate experience, so with any of our advice, we encourage you to consider how it applies to you and what you might need to consider further. That said, you are not the first person to do this and you will not be the last. There are other people with disabilities who had to navigate this decision,, and learning from them is a great way to make a more informed decision.



## What Resources To Look For At A College

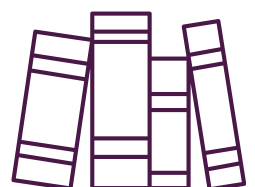
Each college applicant has different priorities that lead their college search process, such as:

- \* Geographic location
- \* Specific academic programs
- \* Social Scene
- \* Certain clubs, sports, or extracurriculars

While all of these and other factors are important in determining the best college for you, it is important as a disabled woman to consider additional factors such as:

- \* Accessibility
- \* Disability culture and inclusion
- \* Resources for women and multiple marginalized people
- \* And much more.

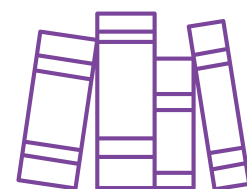
As you start to dig through your options of colleges and universities, you should also investigate what the school has available for you as a woman with a disability so you can make an informed decision about what will be the right fit for you.



# Accessibility & Inclusion:

First, you need to determine how accessible the campus will be to you. Specifically you will want to learn about accessibility in the academic buildings, housing, communal spaces like the library or cafeteria, as well as the accommodations process and the policies in place. If you can visit campus before enrolling, you will get first hand experience of the layout and accessibility of the building or campus, however you do not have to visit campus to learn about the services and supports available.

Reviewing the website for information about disability services and office for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), looking at the virtual tour materials, and speaking with a representative from the admissions office are all steps you can take to learn more about campus accessibility and inclusion. You might also want to explore their commitment to inclusion by reviewing their mission statement as well as a diversity statement, their vision statement, their history and even long term strategic plan- if they are available. These can give you a sense as to their commitment to not just accessibility but inclusion.



# College Tours and Visits

While it can often be expensive and time consuming to visit your prospective colleges, if you have the opportunity to go in-person to a college you are interested in, we recommend you do so. Touring a college campus can give you a better sense of the actual environment and accessibility, give you the opportunity to engage with students, and better conceptualize if the school will be the best fit for you. Some questions to consider while touring may be:

- \*Are the accessibility features/technology working or faulty? If they are faulty, asking how quickly maintenance fixes things may be a good place to start.
- \*How accessible are the walkways and paths between buildings for you? What might they be like in different weather conditions?
- \*How close together are the buildings you will be most frequently visiting?
- \*Will the study spaces at the library be accessible to you? Do they provide quiet spaces for studying? Is there more than one space accessible to you for periods of time when the library may be more busy?
- \*Are any of the common areas and meeting spaces sensory-friendly? If not, what modifications can be done to the space to make them more accessible to you?
- \*What kind of food does the cafeteria offer and when? How do they handle dietary restrictions? How knowledgeable are the staff on dietary restrictions?
- \*How many residence halls have accessible rooms? How many have accessible visitor bathrooms? Do they have bathrooms that are gender neutral?
- \*Where are the parking lots and how many accessible spaces do they have? How many people on campus may need those accessible spaces regularly?
- \*What is the signage like across campus? How do they advertise events and activities and is that information accessible to you?

# College Tours and Visits

As you tour campus, be thoughtful about all aspects of life, you will likely be spending several years here, and the more that is already accessible to you, the fewer battles you will have to fight (hopefully). This is not a conclusive list of questions which may or may not pertain to you. We encourage you to come up with questions to ask that will help you know if the institution you are visiting will be able to provide you the accommodations that will ensure you have a fun and successful college experience. Even when a college or university has taken steps towards being a disability-friendly campus, that doesn't always mean that their admissions department is well-versed on the topic or prepared to answer all of your questions. While you're visiting a college, make time to meet with various individuals who can speak directly to the questions you have, this may include the disability services, housing and residence life, dining, health center and diversity center. If you want a more insider perspective and knowledge about what it is like to be a student on a campus, ask the students there. Seek out disabled students or alumni. This can be an informal meeting by stopping a student while walking through campus, or you can ask admissions or disability services to arrange a meeting for you. If you have the time and capacity, you may want to arrange an overnight stay with a student host. This will give you the opportunity to spend the night in a residence hall, potentially go to a class or extracurricular meeting, and hang out with students on campus outside of business hours.





## Application Advice

So you have narrowed down your list of potential colleges to the handful that you are choosing to apply to and now it's time to complete all of the application forms. College applications can be quite draining; they're long and often require several components such as personal statements, transcripts, and letters of recommendation. Planning out time to work on your application across several sessions will give you the opportunity to think through your answers, reread what you have, and feel confident in how you portray yourself. Writing down the application deadline as well as a timeline of what you want to get done and when can help you to put together a stronger application.

## Personal Statement

The personal statement often fills prospective students with dread, especially as it asks you to speak to who you are and for many people it can feel complicated to try to summarize who you are. As women with disabilities, it can be difficult to communicate your understanding of self and how it relates to your various identities as a disabled woman.

You may find yourself questioning whether you want to talk about being a disabled woman, as it can feel like a huge part of what makes you you, but being open and honest about your identities can feel like you're lining yourself up for ableism or for people to misread the tone of your application and apply a lens of pity or inspiration. So what is the best way to summarize who you are?

Unfortunately there is no clear cut answer to this question beyond doing what feels the most representative of who you are. Choose to share as much or as little as you feel comfortable to regarding your identity as a woman with a disability and have a friend, family member, or mentor who knows you well review your personal statement and provide feedback on if it is representative of who you are. Trust yourself to know what the right things to share are in order to help the application reviewer get to know you better. You cannot control how people will choose to interpret what you share in your personal statement or what biases or beliefs they will bring to the table when they do. Just remember that whatever they decide based on your statement is a reflection of the university and its values and should be taken into consideration when making your final decision.



## Letters of Recommendation

Many applications ask for letters of recommendation from people who can speak to your character, academics, and so forth. When selecting someone to ask to write you a letter, a good starting point is identifying and asking a teacher who works within the subject area you wish to study to write your letter of recommendation. If you do not have a strong relationship with a teacher in the area you wish to study, you can ask any of your school teachers or counselors, ideally someone who you have a strong relationship with. If you have been out of school for a while, homeschool, or are being asked for multiple letters of recommendation, you can also ask someone who interacts with you at work, while volunteering, or through a club. If you have a mentor through a program like EmpowHer Camp, you may want them to write you a letter and speak to what they know of your work ethic, dedication, or skills.

## Disability Disclosure

We will get into the legal specifications of disability disclosure later on, however it's important to consider when and how you would like to disclose your disability to a school. For some who have more apparent disabilities, there may be limitations on your choice to disclose, while others with non-apparent disabilities may have more time and options as to how and when they will disclose. Whatever the case may be for you, it is important to keep in mind that you legally cannot be discriminated against for your disability in the admissions process and throughout your college experience. On the flip side, there is nothing that says that disclosing your disability will give you a better chance of being accepted. Some things to consider when deciding whether to disclose or not:

- Disclosing your disability ensures you have access to all the rights afforded you by the law. Not disclosing your disability means there is no obligation on the school's part to provide you accommodations.
- Higher education institutions cannot ask you if you have a disability.
- If a disabled student has an individualized education program (IEP) or 504 plan, your school transcripts will not reflect this unless you have taken classes with a modified curriculum.
- Your standardized test scores will not say if you took them with accommodations.
- If you attend a disability-specific high school (like a school for the blind) information about the school that is sent with your transcript will likely indicate the profile of the school and as such your disability may be apparent to the application reviewers.
- Your recommender may mention your disability if they feel it is relevant within the content of your letter of recommendation and not consider whether or not you wanted to disclose. It is important to discuss this with anyone you ask to write a recommendation for you.

# Deciding Where to Go To College

You did a ton of research, maybe visited some colleges, completed your applications, and then you waited. Eventually you heard back from colleges and hooray you were accepted into a few, we are so happy for and proud of you! If you have not take the time to do so, celebrate a little bit then come back to us.

## **Now it's time to make a decision, but where to start?**

Generally, you want to consider the factors that matter most to you; if you have done your research before applying, you should know that all of the potential final choices meet your basic needs and some (if not all) of your wants. Take some time to consider what factors might be the most important or impactful for you and then determine which school is most likely to check all the boxes for you. In addition to some of the factors we have outlined previously in this guide, some potential components to take into consideration may be:

- The degree to which the university is accessible. There may be a unicorn college that meets all of your needs and then some, but chances are you may still need to advocate for yourself. It's important in your decision making process for you to consider how much support you will be getting and how much you may need to advocate for yourself.
- Will your college experience get you closer to your career goals. When making your final decision, it is important to consider the translation of academic success to your eventual career, after all that's the main reason you are going to college. In addition to looking at the types of classes you will take and how they will prepare you for your career, look at alumni success and employment rates, graduation and retention rates, and what the career services office offers. If you are still figuring out what you want to do post college, consider what kind of flexibility you will have at this university to explore your options and how robust its degree offerings are.
- The price tag and how you will be covering those costs. While your decision does not have to be led by what the cost will be, we recommend that you take into strong consideration how much debt you will accrue during your time and what options for payment you may have. Many schools give out scholarships as do organizations, companies, and even social clubs. Receiving scholarships to help pay for your education can drastically reduce the debt you will find yourself paying over the years to follow. Student loans and grants will also help you fund your education, but be sure to familiarize yourself with the financial aid package the college offers you and consider the long-term costs for each school.

● Will you be close to your family/friend or be within a reasonable distance to some kind of support system. We all have different day-to-day support needs whether that be physical help, support with executive function, or chatting with our mom about a bad day with the push of a button. Whether you need minimal or more advance support, it's important to consider how quickly or easily you will be able to get it. If something bad happens to you or your family or you need additional support and someone needs to travel to be together quickly, it may be a good idea to investigate how easily arrangements can be made and how quickly that travel can occur. Alternatively, if you have established connections in the area (extended family or friends) who might be able to step in during an emergency or tragic event, then you may find yourself considering options further away from home. It may not be at the top of lists for consideration, but considering the logistics before deciding is recommended.

● On-Campus Clubs and Community- “the Vibe”: connecting with members of the campus community and learning about campus culture and traditions should be part of your college search and hopefully you will have gotten a sense for what the environment is like and how you may fit in. While the other factors on this list have very clear answers, this might be a factor you spend a bit more time thinking through for yourself, because there may not be an obvious answer.

Whatever factors you choose to focus on, it's important to consider how each school ranks among those factors and what meets the most criteria. If you're still struggling with your decision, consider making pros and cons lists. While you may have weeks or even months to make this decision, once you have heard back from the colleges you applied to we recommend you work to come to a definitive decision sooner rather than later. The sooner you commit to a decision then the more time you have to make the necessary arrangements, find the financial resources to afford your program, and plans before you head off to college.



## Paying for College: Navigating Financial Pathways

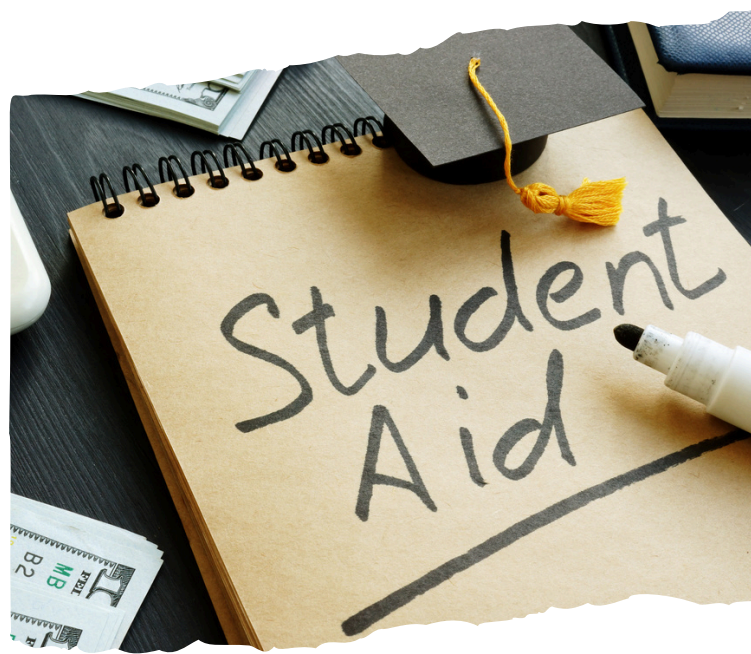
As you plan for your academic career, understanding and planning for the costs of your college education is key to your success in and after college. The price tag is usually high, so careful planning and applying for available resources and opportunities can help you make an informed decision and ensure you know how you will be covering costs. The following are some ways you can finance your education.

### Explore Financial Aid Options

Start by researching various financial aid options, including scholarships, grants, and loans. Most universities will create a financial aid package for you once you submit the FAFSA (see next section). This financial aid package will likely be made up of a mix of scholarships, grants, and loans and in many cases will include a contribution that you or your parents will be expected to make or get a private loan for. Be aware of which financial aid options you will have to pay back and which you will not and what the interest rate will be on those payments. If loans are necessary, carefully evaluate and compare different loan options. Federal student loans often offer more favorable terms and lower interest rates than private loans. Ensure you understand the terms, repayment options, and potential impact on your financial future. Many institutions and private organizations offer merit-based or need-based scholarships, which can also significantly offset tuition costs.

### The FAFSA

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a crucial step in determining eligibility for federal grants, loans, and work-study programs. Completing the FAFSA opens the door to various financial aid opportunities and helps create a comprehensive financial aid package. Some of the money you receive will be need-based grants which provide free assistance, some you will have to work for through an on campus job, and some you will have to repay once you are out of college. Remember that you will need to fill out the application every year in order to be eligible and considered for further financial assistance.



## Work-Study Programs & Part Time Jobs

Work-study programs provide students with part-time employment opportunities on campus, allowing them to earn money to cover educational expenses while gaining valuable work experience. Work-study happens in different departments across your college, from dining to the library to academic departments. If you are interested in specific opportunities, be proactive about exploring those opportunities and have your resume ready. Depending on your disability, you may struggle to complete certain work-study positions, so focus on your strengths and explore what opportunities can utilize those skills. If you are ineligible for work-study or want to have additional income available, consider part-time work or internships during the academic year and summer breaks to save money for educational costs. In addition to having some spending money, taking on employment opportunities also helps you build your resume while you are in school, which will increase your employability after you leave college.

## Scholarships and Grants

Depending on what kind of student you are, your college may offer you an academic scholarship or if you are an athlete or involved with certain clubs you may receive athletic or service-oriented scholarships. These scholarships can greatly reduce the cost of your education, but you will still need to make up the difference, and one way to do this without accruing more debt is through scholarships and grants.

Once you know your college and degree program, take time to dig into potential scholarships and grants offered by local community organizations, businesses, and foundations as well as the university you are planning to attend. Many communities have resources dedicated to supporting the education of their residents. When searching for scholarship opportunities, remember that you can get scholarships based on your intended major/degree, volunteer experience, leadership experience, community engagement, athletic involvement, club and interests, identities, and much more. Work with your guidance counselor, admissions counselor, career coach, or career center at your school to identify opportunities to connect with organizations offering scholarships. Keep in mind that scholarships large and small are all going to help you cut down the costs of your education as you are not expected to repay them.



## Employer Tuition Assistance Programs

Some employers offer tuition assistance or reimbursement programs for employees pursuing higher education. If you are open to doing your degree program across an extended period of time, looking into companies or jobs that will pay for your education can be a great way to cut back on the costs of your education. If you are certain about the type of career you would like to have and where you would like to work you can also check with potential employers about opportunities for them to assist with the cost of your college experience. For example, if you want to go to school for nursing, you may find that some hospitals are willing to cover the cost of your education if you commit to working there for a certain amount of time upon graduating.

Whatever way you decide to cover the costs of your education, remember to plan now and develop a budget to understand and manage your expenses during college. By being proactive about exploring these avenues and seeking guidance from high school counselors and financial aid offices, you can create a comprehensive strategy for financing their college education while minimizing the financial burden in the long run.



## Vocational Rehabilitation

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR or Voc Rehab) are state run programs that receive federal funding to support people with disabilities in becoming more independent and getting employed. Programs vary from state to state, but many Vocational Rehabilitation offices offer scholarships and financial support for disabled students to attend college. This aid can help cover tuition, fees, books, and more. If you would like support in figuring out your career goals, funding your education, and more, reach out to VR in your state to get more information and explore the possibilities.

# Resources for Disabled Women Students

## Disability Services/Resource Center

Every college has a disability coordinator or disability resource center, who ensures that the students with disabilities get what they need. Unlike in elementary or high school, colleges do not utilize IEPs and/or 504 plans, as such you will need to advocate for your accommodations with this person or office.

Connecting with the disability services coordinator or center early on before you commit to a college will help you better assess what accessibility the college already has established as well as what accommodations they will be able to provide. This will give you a sense of what the starting point of your advocacy will be. Disability service centers and coordinator are your on-campus advocate and ally, so speaking with them during the application phase will give you a sense of who might be supporting you throughout your college career.

Once you have selected a school and enrolled, the first step to getting the accommodations you need is registering with disability services. Until and unless you register with disability services, you will not get the formal support and accommodations from the university. Once you are registered with the office then you can begin discussions of reasonable accommodations. The disability resource center works for both you and the college and will play an important role in ensuring you have what you need to succeed. Check out the know your rights and accommodations sections of this guide to learn more about this process.



## Disability Culture on Campus

Aside from getting access to the accommodations you may need, having access to a community of other disabled students and people like you can have a serious impact on your success at college. Throughout your college experience you will likely experience ableism, prejudice, and discrimination, so knowing and connecting with other students with disabilities on campus can help make these harder moments of your life and college journey feel less lonely and more navigable.

Some college campuses have disability culture centers (staffed and unstaffed) where the campus community can connect in an accessible way to learn more about disability issues, have space for community discussions and dialogues, or connect as a disability community. For colleges that have these types of centers, it can be helpful to connect early on to learn what they have to offer and what student organizations may already exist to support disabled students.

Unfortunately most campuses do not have disability culture centers, but don't fear, there may still be cool disability community stuff happening on campus! Many student-led disability clubs and organizations are connected to the university's diversity center, DEI center, Multicultural Center, or other similar offices. You may be able to learn about such clubs by reaching out to the office/center at your university and asking to be connected. If one of these centers does not exist, asking the office of student life to share a list of active student organizations and clubs may help you connect with any disabled student organizations or clubs.

If there isn't a disability club on campus, consider starting one! If one in five people in the US has a disability, odds are you are not the only disabled person on campus and maybe others would love to have a space to connect. Reach out to the student life office, DEI center, and faculty or staff you have identified as allies to get support starting an organization.



## On Campus Allies

While the goal is to find a school that is going to be inclusive and accessible for you with or without accommodations, you will still likely find yourself dealing with ableism, barriers, and discrimination. Later on in the guide, you can learn about your legal rights, but navigating these situations and advocating for yourself is more than just rights and accommodations, it is also about interpersonal relationships and communication. When navigating these situations, it's always a good idea to find your allies and ask for their support. They may be friends, professors, club advisors, work study supervisors, or someone else. As you go through your college career, you will discover that there are people who understand the struggles you experience and are willing to support you and amplify you and your message to the campus community and administration. Hold tight to the connections you have with these people. It also does not hurt to familiarize yourself with the staff who run buildings and grounds and housekeeping. While the people who work in these offices often go unnoticed, they are the people who will most likely be able to make changes to your physical environment, and as such may be able to help you with physical barriers you come across. Learning some of the staff in these offices and the process to put in a work order will go a long way in resolving issues. In addition to finding your allies.

## Disability Community in Surrounding Area

Sometimes there aren't established disability social circles or supports on your college campus. Many students with disabilities may be grappling with their conceptualization of themselves and their identity as a disabled person or may not have been given the space or time to understand or accept their disability. This may even be the case for you. If so, it may be a great idea to explore the community surrounding your university to see how active the disability community is in the area.

You may find support and information about events and community organizing at the closest center for independent living and protection and advocacy (P&A) agency. Knowing about these organizations may also help you when navigating any issues that come up whether that be getting attendant services or advocating for your rights in a variety of settings. You may also want to search on social media or online for disability advocacy, activism, and pride community events in the area. If you have disabled friends or connections in the area, ask them what if any disability community exists near the college.

## Addressing Medical Needs

While you may feel well supported with your medical needs at home, if you choose to go away for college it may become imperative for you to get support from a variety of medical providers. As such it is wise to look into what medical providers are in your area. Depending on your disability and gender identity you may need to explore what your options are for the following:

- **Reproductive Health Clinic (Women's Health Clinic):** college is a time for exploration and growth and knowing about your reproductive system and addressing any concerns around birth control, STDs, or UTIs may come up during that time. Be proactive if/when you decide to become sexually active.
- **Disability Specialists:** if you have regular visits with a medical professional regarding your disability, it may be a good time to consider the feasibility of continuing to visit the same specialist you have at home or if you need to start working with a new one closer to where you are going to college.
- **Durable Medical Equipment Supplier/Specialist:** If you use any specialized wheelchairs, prosthetic devices, braces, or similar devices, it is good to have a sense of where the closest one is to the area you are living in. For many people, if they have only recently gotten their device, it may not be the time to switch to a new specialist as a new one may not be willing to work on a device made by someone else. However, if you find yourself in an emergency situation or you are in need of a new wheelchair/wheelchair parts, braces, prosthetics, etc. finding a provider closer to your university may save you and your family some headaches.
- **Physical & Occupational Therapists:** If you are working with a PT or OT on maintaining or building new skills to be independent, you don't want to let that work go to waste by dropping off from these therapies. Look for who can provide these services for you at or near your new home

It is also important when looking into the medical providers you may need access to that you also consider how becoming a college student might impact your insurance or Medicare/Medicaid coverage and what additional barriers may crop up for you depending on how and where you pursue your college education.



## Title IX Coordinator

Similar to a disability resources or accommodations office or coordinator, it's important to check to see who at the university is in charge of managing the Title IX complaints (we'll talk more about Title IX later on). While we hope you will never need to file a Title IX complaint or need the support of the coordinator, it is incredibly important that you know who this person is and being able to find information about the Title IX coordinator or office as an applicant speaks to the college's commitment to safety and accountability.

## Women's Center

Similar to Disability Cultures Centers, some colleges and universities have spaces specifically geared towards women (and sometimes nonbinary individuals) that provide resources to learn more about gender issues or topics, get involved with student groups, and find community of people thinking about or working on gender issues who you may have shared values with. When these centers do not exist there are often clubs or student groups that are focused on advocating for or simply gathering to talk about women and gender related topics. On some college campuses these organizations are affiliated with a larger organization such as Planned Parenthood or AAUW (originally the American Association of University Women).



## Navigating Difficult Experiences

We hope that your college experience will be a positive one where you get to explore new interests, make friends, and learn. However, there may be times when you find yourself in difficult situations where you may struggle to continue with your college journey. You may feel embarrassed, scared, guilty or shameful, but remember that everyone has struggled at some point in their life and asking for help is not a bad thing or a sign of weakness. Lean on your network and friends and utilize the resources available to help work through this.

## Sexual Assault

While we hope that you never experience any form of sexual assault or violence, unfortunately this does happen on college campuses and for many disabled women our identities can impact the way we and others respond to it. Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual activity that happens without consent. It can take many forms and may involve physical force (unwanted touching or groping, forced sexual activities or intercourse, and more), coercion and manipulation, or sexual harassment (unwanted advances, inappropriate comments, and more). First and foremost we want you to remember that sexual assault is never the fault of the survivor. Whether you are unable to physically resist, do not understand what is happening, felt coerced into compliance, the responsibility lies solely with the perpetrator who violated your boundaries.

If you or someone you know experiences sexual assault, know that it can be hard to understand and unravel what has happened to you. The victim may find themselves questioning if what happened was sexual assault, if people will believe them, if people will blame them, and a multitude of other questions. On the next page are some steps that you can take if you experience sexual assault, whether or not you choose to take them know that you get to make these decisions for yourself. Also understand that it may be hard to know what to do when someone has made you feel like you do not have autonomy over yourself and your body.

1. **Seek Safety:** If you're in immediate danger or need medical attention, prioritize your safety. You can call emergency services, have someone else call for help, or go to a safe place.

2. **Reach Out for Support:** You do not have to face this alone. Talk to someone you trust, such as a friend, family member, or counselor. There are also hotlines and organizations specifically for survivors of sexual assault that can provide support and guidance, if you do not feel comfortable sharing with your community. Also remember that you can choose to share more later if you feel inclined to do so.

3. **Preserve Evidence:** If you feel comfortable and safe doing so, consider preserving any evidence of the assault, such as clothing or messages from the perpetrator. This can be important if you decide to report the assault to authorities.

4. **Seek Medical Care:** Even if you don't have visible injuries, it's important to seek medical attention after a sexual assault. A healthcare provider can assess any physical injuries, provide treatment, and address concerns about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or pregnancy.

5. **Consider Reporting:** Reporting the assault to law enforcement or the Title IX Office is a personal decision and not always the right choice for everyone. However, if you choose to report, know that there are resources and support available to help you through the process.

6. **Take Care of Yourself:** Healing from sexual assault takes time, and it's essential to prioritize self-care. Surround yourself with supportive people, spend time doing activities that bring you comfort and joy, and consider seeking therapy or counseling to process your emotions.

Remember that no matter what you've experienced, you deserve to be treated with dignity, respect, and compassion. You are not alone, and there are people and resources available to support you on your journey toward healing and recovery. You are worthy of love, safety, and happiness.

## Mental Health Crisis

Experiencing a mental health crisis can be overwhelming and frightening and can be brought about by several factors from school pressure to social life difficulties to pre-existing mental health disabilities. There are many signs that can help you determine if you or someone you know is having a mental health crisis, including but not limited to intense emotional distress, thoughts of self-harm or suicide, struggling to carry out daily tasks or experiencing a decline in functioning related to their mental health, and severe disconnection from reality or yourself or others. If you experience a mental health crisis it's essential to remember that you're not alone, and there are steps you can take to seek help and support. Some steps you may want to consider taking are:

1. **Stay Calm:** If you're experiencing a crisis or supporting someone who is, try to remain as calm as possible. Remember that you have the strength to get through this.
2. **Reach Out for Support:** Don't hesitate to reach out to someone you trust, whether it's a friend, family member, or mental health professional. Talking to someone can provide comfort and help you feel less alone.
3. **Seek Professional Help:** If you're in immediate danger or experiencing severe symptoms, consider seeking help from a mental health professional. They can assess your situation and provide appropriate care and support.
4. **Contact a Crisis Hotline:** Many crisis hotlines are available 24/7 to provide support and guidance during times of crisis. These hotlines are staffed by trained professionals who can offer assistance and resources. Keep in mind that some hotlines are not equipped to support people with multiple-marginalized identities and will send law enforcement officers to check which may have the opposite effect of what you were hoping to. Before contacting a crisis hotline, be aware of the risks and benefits and make the best decision you can for your situation.

5. **Create a Safety Plan:** If you're prone to mental health crises, consider creating a safety plan with the help of a therapist or trusted individual. A safety plan outlines coping strategies, support systems, and steps to take during a crisis.

6. **Practice Self-Care:** Take care of yourself during a mental health crisis by engaging in activities that promote relaxation and well-being. This might include deep breathing exercises, mindfulness meditation, or engaging in hobbies you enjoy.

7. **Avoid Harmful Substances:** During a mental health crisis, it's important to avoid alcohol, drugs, or other substances that can worsen symptoms or impair judgment.

8. **Follow Up:** After the crisis has passed, make sure to follow up with a mental health professional for ongoing support and treatment. They can help you develop coping strategies, manage symptoms, and prevent future crises.

Remember that experiencing a mental health crisis is not a sign of weakness, and you are not alone. There are people who care about you and resources available to help you through difficult times. Reach out for support and take care of yourself.



# Roommates

If you have decided to live on campus, there is a pretty good chance that you will have a roommate at some point in your college career. Depending on the school and housing process, you may be able to select your roommate or you may be matched based on information you share with the housing and residence life office. When you move in together, you will likely want to establish ground rules so that you are on the same page about what you expect from each other and how you can respect each other's space and privacy. Setting clear boundaries early on can help with communication later. If and when conflicts or disagreements arise, address them promptly, directly, and respectfully. Approach them with an open and constructive mindset, listening to your roommate's perspective, expressing your own feelings and concerns, and working together to find common ground. Letting issues build can lead to resentment and make it more difficult to find solutions. If you are having difficulties resolving the issue, bringing in a third neutral person to help talk through the issues and find a constructive solution can be fruitful. If you are living on campus, your resident assistant is a great resource for addressing and resolving roommate conflict.





## Difficulties with School Work

Whether you are going to college immediately after high school or you take some time off before you pursue a degree, it is important to understand that college classes and school work are different from high school and may require more effort than you anticipated. If you find yourself struggling to understand the information you are learning, keep up with the assignments and tests, or manage your time and commitments, do not feel embarrassed, instead ask for help. There are many people at your college who want to see you succeed and happy to provide assistance in that process. They include:

- **Your Professors:** Most professors are happy to answer questions and give further information outside of class. They will have set hours when you can stop by their office to ask questions and get support these are called office hours or drop-in hours.
- **Friends/Classmates:** If you are struggling with a unit or you missed class and do not have the notes, you may find that connecting with your classmates to share notes and talk through concepts can help you feel more confident with the material. Asking to study with other students before tests or read over each others assignments can also help you feel more comfortable with the information.
- **Tutoring/Writing Center:** Most students are required to take classes outside of their majors, these are called General Education (Gen Eds) requirements. At many schools this includes a writing course. For many of these introductory classes you can get support a tutoring center where they provide drop-in hours where a tutor is already scheduled to be available to explain concepts and help with homework. If you are having difficulty with higher level or major specific classes, you may request a tutor usually through the tutoring center or the academic department to assist you with your class.
- **Resident Assistants & Peer Mentors:** Many colleges have created opportunities for people to get support from peers. Two such ways are resident assistants and peer mentors which are upperclassman students who have on-campus jobs where they use their own college experience and have knowledge of the available resources to help you.
- **Advisor:** Your advisor is well-educated on the resources available across campus. If you find yourself struggling with school, they will be able to share information on the available supports and make referrals on your behalf to get you the support you need. In many cases, a combination of these resources and others will be the key to success. Other things you may also want to keep in mind is how you are managing your time and whether you are doing school work in a space that is conducive to how you learn best.

## Changing Your Major

There are many reasons people change their majors, they may struggle with the content or realize it does not interest them, they may find that it was not what they expected to be learning, they may change and grow and find they want to pursue different careers, or a whole other reason. If you find yourself considering changing your major, there are a few things to consider before taking this step including but not limited to:

- How many classes have you completed and will they transfer over to a new program?
- Will you be able to complete all the classes on the timeline you originally anticipated or will you have to stay in school longer or take summer classes to keep up? If so, how might this affect your future plans?
- What career prospects does your new major have?
- Does your school offer this major? If it does, what are the faculty and program like? If it does not, what does transferring entail?
- Why do you want to change your major?

These are just some of the questions you will want to ask yourself in order to make an informed decision.



## Know Your Legal Rights

There are four laws that you should be aware of in order to best advocate for yourself. They are:

- 1. Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA):** The ADA makes it illegal to discriminate against people with disabilities in public and private sectors including higher education as such public and private universities cannot discriminate against students with disabilities. It should be noted that the ADA has an exemption for religious entities which means if you go to a school that is strictly a religious school then they may be exempt from the ADA.
- 2. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504):** Section 504 prohibits any entity receiving federal financial assistance from discriminating against individuals with disabilities. The majority of colleges and universities receive federal financial dollars in some form or another, as such most higher education institutions, including religious schools, fall under Section 504. These colleges and universities are required to follow Section 504. This means they cannot discriminate against disabled students because they accept federal funding. If you go to a religious school that accepts financial funding including federal financial aid then they would be subject to Section 504.
- 3. Fair Housing Amendments Act (FHAA) or Fair Housing Act (FHA):** The FHAA prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in renting housing. Specifically it requires housing providers, including higher education institutions, to make reasonable modifications or accommodations to rules, policies, and procedures to ensure equal access to people with disabilities.
- 4. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX):** Title IX protects against discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and pregnancy in any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. Like Section 504, Title IX applies to most colleges and universities as the majority of higher education institutions receive federal financial assistance. With all of this said, it can feel confusing to know if you are covered by these laws. You're protected by these laws if you're considered a qualified individual with a disability. The ADA specifically defines the term "individual with a disability" as having a: (1) Physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more daily life activities, (2) Record of such impairment, or (3) Regarded as having that impairment. The term "qualified" means that you're capable of completing the college program with or without reasonable modifications or accommodations.

## ADA & Section 504

Some examples of discrimination under the ADA or Section 504 can include denying admission to students with disabilities on the basis of their disability, steering a student with a disability down a more restrictive career path, excluding a disabled student from specific courses, and failing to provide reasonable accommodations and auxiliary aids which could be in the course work, in the classroom settings, or in the physical environment, and can include interpreters or other forms of accessible communication.

## Fair Housing Amendments Act

Under the FHAA, students with disabilities who live on campus have a right to equal access to their on campus housing. This can include reasonable accommodations to rules, policies, and procedures such as allowing a service animal to live in an animal free residential halls. Additionally, the law requires that the housing provider, in this case the college or university, allows the student with a disability to make reasonable modifications to their unit, at their own expense, to make the unit more accessible.

While the FHAA only requires that the housing provider allow people with disabilities to make a reasonable modification at the individual's expense, meeting with disability services, housing and residence life or even the dean of students to discuss your needs will better ensure that you are given a unit that provides the accessibility that you need and/or that the college will cover the costs of these changes.

If your college does not provide housing or you are choosing to live off campus, the Fair Housing Amendments Act still applies to your housing provider and protects your rights within your housing. However, your college will not be accountable for the accessibility of this housing.

## Title IX

We hope that you never experience any sex-based discrimination or violence during your college education or elsewhere, however, it is not impossible. If you or someone you know experiences sexual assault or harassment whether from a professor, staff, or student, you are protected by Title IX and should seek support from the Title IX coordinator. In these situations, it is good to remember that almost every employee of the university from your resident assistant to your professors to your club advisor is a mandated reporter. If you disclose an incident you or someone you know experienced, they will be required to submit a report to the Title IX coordinator which the coordinator will have to investigate. If you want to talk to someone about the incident without a report, your school has a list of individuals such as the school therapist who you can talk with and not incite a report. With that said, we want to encourage you that if you experience some form of discrimination or violence, that you do not doubt your experiences and reach out for help.

## Protecting Yourself from Discrimination

The first and best thing you can do to protect yourself is to know your rights as a person with a disability and student. Another step to take if you have fears of discrimination or if you are already experiencing is to keep clear and detailed documentation of conversations, decisions, and situations that have take place. Take notes when you have meetings about your access or accommodations and write down when, where, and who you talked to. Send these notes to the individuals involved in this meeting as record of the conversation. Keep copies of emails and accommodation requests that you submit. If you experience access issues that you can record on video or in pictures do so. This information can help you if you experience persistent discrimination in the future. In addition to taking these steps, a proactive step we recommend taking is determining who your allies are. You may find support in your disability resource center, your academic advisor, a club advisor, your resident assistant (RA), or even staff in the Office of Student Life. Knowing who will support you in advocating and navigating discrimination or barriers can help you sustain momentum, avoid burnout, and have your concerns heard.

## Accommodations

Accommodations are a critical aspect of a successful college experience for many students with disabilities both in the classroom and across campus. While there are many common accommodations, what each person needs to succeed will be different and unique to you. If you had support in K-12 such as an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), then that may help you to assess what kind of accommodations may help you succeed in college. However, it is important to know and understand that IEPs are not applicable in higher education, so you will need to advocate for accommodations and accessibility for yourself.

### Who to Ask About Arranging Accommodations

Accommodations go through the disability services or resources office, which is often connected to health services or student support services. You will need to connect with disability services and let them know you would like to request accommodations. If you are registered with disability services, they must work with you to make sure the accommodations you need are in place. For example, if you are deaf or hard of hearing and need sign language interpreters or captioning for class to be accessible, then the disability services office must work with you to make your classes accessible by coordinating interpreters or captioning with the instructor.

It is often best to start this process as early as you can to ensure you and the university have plenty of time to make arrangements. It is crucial that you, the student, reach out to disability services. Parents do not legally have a right to intervene in your education or advocate for you at the collegiate level. Additionally, if the college is not aware that a student is disabled, they are not legally required to give them accommodations. If your school does not have a disability services office or equivalent, contacting your Dean of Students or your academic advisor is the best next step as they will be able to connect you with the appropriate person to guide you through the next steps in the process.

## What to Include In Your Accommodation Request

When asking for an accommodation it is important to communicate several pieces of information in writing. Specifically, these four things:

1. Identify yourself and that you are a person with a disability.
2. Identify how your disability affects you in school. If you are living on campus it is important to also include how it impacts your living situation.
3. Identify the accommodation that you need.
4. Identify how this accommodation will help you.

At the close of your accommodation request you should include a deadline that you expect to receive a response to your request. Your deadline should be reasonable such as within one to two weeks unless this is something that is urgent in which case you may want to expedite your deadline. If you don't receive a response within that time that you listed in your request then you should follow up with the office to make sure your request has not be overlooked. If you still do not receive a response, depending on how much time you have you should treat that lack of response as a denial and immediately begin the appeals process so that you can get the accommodations you need sooner. More on the appeals process later on.

## Process

Every college is different when it comes to the accommodations request process for disabled students. Most schools will ask for documentation. When a disability is visible meaning a person's disability is obvious and the correlation to the reasonable accommodation is also obvious, medical documentation can not be required. An example of this could be if the student is a wheelchair user and asks for an accommodation for all classrooms to be on the first floor or reachable by elevators/ramps. This person may not be required to show any medical documentation. If your school does require documentation ask exactly what type of documentation is needed before collecting the documentation so that you aren't slowed down by having improper documentation. A school can require proof of a student's disability. However it is important to note that a school can not require so much documentation that it becomes overwhelming, and a student is discouraged to apply for accommodations. If a university does require documentation for proof of a person's disability it is best to provide current documentation, meaning no more than three years old. The best way for you to get this documentation is to request that your medical provider write a letter to your school about your disability. The medical provider's letter should include things like their contact information, the medical provider's credentials, any tests that were performed to determine a diagnosis, a description of your disability, an explanation of how your disability relates to your ability to participate and a list of accommodations the medical provider recommends for you.

## Examples of Accommodation Modifications

There is not a specific list of accommodations a student can request, because everyone has different ways of meeting their needs. Take some time to think about and research what is going to work best for you. Some examples of what you can request include:

- If you use mobility aids, requesting a table be put in the classroom instead of using a desk.
- For students with vision disabilities providing materials and Braille or electronic format
- If you're a deaf student, providing qualified sign language interpreters, captioning, or amplification equipment.
- If you have a learning disability or a disability that impacts your dexterity or processing times or are neurodivergent, you may want to request a note-taker or extra time on exams.

As you gain experience in college, you will learn what does and does not work for you and when you do, do not be afraid to advocate for changes to your accommodations that suit you and will set you up for success.

## Appeal

If the school refuses to provide a disabled student access to reasonable accommodations or the school discriminates against a student because of their disability you can file an appeal. There are three ways that a student can file an appeal:

- 1. Submit an appeal within the school and follow their process for assessing it.** In order to appeal within your university you should figure out what the internal appeals process is by looking in the student handbook. The recommendation for students is that you file your complaint as soon as possible but no later than 180 days from when the denial or the discrimination occurred. When filing a complaint it is important to include as much detail in the information you provide as you possibly can. This includes witnesses to the situation, or any documentation that you may have including emails, texts, or if you kept a journal any pertinent information in your journal.
- 2. File a complaint through the Department of Education or the Department of Justice.** To file a complaint with the Department of Education or the Department of Justice. You must first determine which entity is appropriate for the student's complaint. The Department of Education investigates Title II complaints under the ADA and Section 504 complaints, whereas the Department of Justice investigates Title III complaints under the ADA. If you go to a state school, then you will probably go with the Department of Education but if you go to a private school, then you will probably want to pursue a complaint with the Department of Justice.



**3. File a lawsuit.** If you want to file a lawsuit you first want to find an attorney that would best represent you. To find that attorney, you need to gather the same information that you would want to put in an appeal so all the details such as times, locations, when the discrimination occurred, any documents that you have. Having all of this evidence collected will help you when you meet with the attorney and discuss the situation. There are time limits to filing lawsuits called statute of limitations, so reach out to an attorney in a timely manner if you want to consider filing a lawsuit.

There is nothing that prohibits you from taking two or all three of these actions at the same time. You can file a grievance, file a complaint with the Department of Justice or Department of Education, and reach out to an attorney all at the same time. Whatever route you choose to take, remember that you have every right to get the accommodations you need to have a successful and fun college experience. You may find it difficult to advocate for yourself at times but remember that your advocacy will have a ripple effect and you never know whose life you may improve through your efforts.

## Conclusion

College is an experience that will bring you new knowledge, skills, and connections. While we have done our best to provide insight and information on navigating college, everyone's experience is different and you may not find the answers you are looking for in this guide, if that is the case, we strongly encourage you to seek out the perspectives and advice of other women with disabilities who have gone to college- if you do not know anyone, reach out to Disability EmpowHer Network and we would be more than happy to help you build those connections.

