

Off to College: Tips for Students with Visual Impairments

By Laura Magnuson

College is full of new experiences. You will meet new people, learn new things, and perhaps be away from home for the first time. As a person who has a visual impairment, you may be wondering how you're going to do it all. How will you pick a good school? How will you find all your books and do all your homework? How are you going to find your way to class? Will you be able to make friends with other students? This handout will answer these and other questions.

First Steps

The first step in transitioning to college is finding the best school for you. Don't worry; you don't have to do it alone. Your parents, school counselors, and teacher for the visually impaired will all help you choose a school that meets your needs and goals and best fits with what you want to learn in college.

If you and your parents are able to take a college's campus tour, you can begin to develop a good feel for the school's atmosphere. You also can stop by the office for students with disabilities, which will be an important resource for you in college. This office provides supports to students with disabilities so they will have the same opportunities to complete their education as students without disabilities. Talking with department staff and finding out what kinds of services they provide can help you decide about attending that school. (The name of this office is different for every college, but the title is similar enough that you should be able to find it.)

After Acceptance

Many schools invite new students to an orientation meeting before the school year begins. If you go, you'll receive another tour of the campus and may also have an opportunity to register for the courses you'll take in the fall. Taking this opportunity is a

good idea because it may allow you to obtain in advance materials you'll need for class.

As soon as you know which courses you'll be taking, set up a meeting with the department of disability services, even if you don't know exactly what kind of help you'll need. It's much easier to obtain its services before school starts than in the middle of the term. (Tip: You'll need medical proof of your visual impairment from your regular doctor or an ophthalmologist before you can register for disability services.)

Accommodations

If you decide you need disability services, a specialist from the department will help you determine what accommodations you will need for your classes. Accommodations may include such things as an aide for science labs or a note taker for visual classes such as geography or math. Your specialist will write a letter to your professors, requesting the accommodations you need. This important letter provides documented proof that you have a disability and that the school is obligated to help you.

In some cases, the specialist will deliver the letters for you, but at some universities, the trend has been for students to deliver the letters themselves. Doing so can be a challenge for students who are uncomfortable speaking with new people, but this early contact with your professors gives you three benefits.

First, it allows you to meet with your professors outside of the class setting where they won't be as busy and will be able to listen more attentively to you. Second, it gives you a chance to know the professor and be specific about accommodations you will need. Finally, it helps you further develop self-advocacy skills you will need in college and in life.

You may find that some, or perhaps all, of your professors are unavailable before the

term starts. If that's the case, don't worry. Professors usually have office hours once the term begins, and you can meet during this time. You also can speak with the professor the first day before or after class. Be sure though, that if your office of disability specialist has charged you with delivering the letter of accommodation, that you deliver it to the professor, or to his or her office, no later than the first week of class.

Materials for Class.....

Once you have been accepted to a school, spoken with the department of disability services, and delivered any necessary letters of accommodation to your professors, the next step is to collect your syllabi and books for all your courses.

Ideally, you want to obtain these materials ahead of time and give copies to the department of disability services so the staff has time to convert them into an accessible format. Sometimes, however, professors may not decide on the books for their courses until shortly before classes begin and may not hand out the syllabus until the first day of class.

If you find yourself in a situation like this, don't panic. Here are some steps you can take.

First, e-mail your professors, explain that you have a visual impairment, and request that they e-mail their syllabi to you so you have time to have it converted to an accessible format. You can find their contact information in a faculty directory either on the college Web site or by calling the departments in which they are located. If you don't have access to the Internet or a computer, call the professors and ask them to mail a syllabus to you. If you are still unable to obtain a syllabus before class starts, you will have to wait until the first day and receive one along with the rest of the students. Although not ideal, the situation gives you an opportunity to learn from new challenges.

Books and Other Materials.....

Depending on your level of vision loss, you may need to have your books converted into electronic format or Braille. Once you have your list of required books, go to the college bookstore, purchase or rent your books, then bring them to the department of disability services as soon as possible.

If any of your books aren't available before class begins, don't worry. Your fellow students may be in the same situation, and most professors are understanding if students don't have all of the materials the first day or so.

If materials aren't available before class begins, it's a good idea to explain the situation and assure your professor that you will obtain the material as soon as you can. Although it may

take a couple of weeks for your materials to be converted into accessible format, you can always use a reader provided by the disability services department to keep you current in class.

On Campus.....

Once you arrive on campus, you will probably feel the same way most, if not all, of your fellow freshmen do: intimidated. Like many students, you may be away from home for the first time, and things can seem frightening when they are unfamiliar. Your parents and others can help make your adjustment to campus easier.

When you were in high school, a mobility instructor may have taught you how to travel independently. This instructor probably taught you how to ask for directions, cross streets, pay attention to traffic, plan routes, and use public transportation. You may want to ask this instructor or someone he or she recommends to meet with you on campus before classes start to familiarize you with the locations of your classroom buildings.

If such onsite training is unavailable, all of the skills you have learned from your instructor are going to be invaluable once you are on campus. Once you arrive, ask your parents to help you find the locations of your classroom buildings. It is best to familiarize yourself with these routes as soon as possible so you are not lost on your first day of class.

As prepared as you are, you still may end up lost, especially if the campus is large. The most important thing to remember in this situation is to not panic. If you allow yourself to panic, you may become increasingly disoriented and unable to find help. Remember that many new students become lost during their first week or so at school. If it happens to you, the easiest thing to do is to ask someone immediately to either take you to where you need to go or give you directions. You may also want to carry a cell phone in case you need to call a friend, a cab, or campus security.

One other good rule to follow is to remember landmarks. Depending on your visual impairment, you may be able to see distinctive buildings or sculptures that you could use to orient yourself. If you cannot see at all, you might be able to use auditory landmarks such as a fountain or the bells from a clock tower. However you use landmarks, they can be a valuable tool in navigating the campus.

Socializing

College isn't just about studying and making good grades. It's also about meeting interesting people and socializing. Incoming students are encouraged to attend many events, especially during the first week of classes. Individual dormitories may also set up events such as pizza parties or movie nights. You will also meet people in your classes, and if you form friendships with these students, you can socialize outside of class. Colleges, especially large universities, usually have many nearby restaurants and coffee shops where you and your friends can meet. It's important to become familiar with these locations so you can travel to them independently to meet your friends.

You may be afraid at first, thinking no one will talk to you because of your visual impairment, but don't assume that will be the case. You are surrounded by many people you don't know and who don't know you. They may be more interested in what you are studying or where you're from than your visual impairment. If you act like yourself and let your fellow students see who you really are, you should soon make new friends.

Conclusion

Going to college can be a challenge for anyone, and it can be especially so if you are visually impaired. If you follow the advice in this handout, college may not seem like such an intimidating thing after all. Remember that you have many people around you who are willing to help, and you should feel comfortable asking for that help. College can teach you many things, not the least of which are skills in advocating for yourself as a person with a disability. Remember, too, to have fun and enjoy yourself. College can be one of the best times of your life.