

Looking Ahead: Assistive Technology May Affect Student's Postsecondary Options

A generation ago, few young adults with disabilities attended college or enrolled in other post-high school education. Now, thanks to assistive technology and other advances, more young adults with disabilities than ever before pursue the postsecondary education that leads to professional careers.

Accommodations such as extended time to take tests, using readers or note takers, and obtaining a tutor have been effective for many years. Advances in technology, however, have offered additional options and opened many doors to postsecondary education for students with disabilities.

Personal computers are a catalyst for most of the advances. For example, many schools post class notes for all students on an Internet Web site. Some schools teach courses through interactive Web sites. Students with disabilities that make taking notes or going to a classroom difficult welcome such features.

Specialized assistive technology also helps. For example,

- A student who is deaf can receive class notes via a portable keyboard-like device operated by a classmate who can hear.
- A student with a physical disability can use a voice recognition system to dictate papers rather than using the keyboard.
- A student who is blind can use a software program to print handouts, worksheets and tests in Braille.
- A student with a learning disability can use voice output software to read textbooks or worksheets aloud.

Many colleges and post-high school programs require entering students to lease or purchase their own computer. The software is an expense of the student or, if the student qualifies, their vocational rehabilitation service. If the prospective school does not require students to have their own computer, there are several important questions to ask about the assistive technology available at the school.

The following list is a starting point:

- Does the school offer an accessible computer room or lab? Does the school have specific computers designated for students with disabilities who need adaptive technology?

- What software is installed on the computers? Are the computers Macintosh- or Windows-based? Can the school's computers support student's specialized software?
- Does the school offer private study rooms with computers and fewer distractions for students such as those with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)?
- Are the computers available to a single student for long periods if he or she needs extra time to compose or type papers and other homework?
- How many students use the lab? Are there usually computers available, or must students wait to use them?
- Does the school offer individual or group training on the computers? Is there a technical support person to work with students to familiarize them with new tools?

If it appears that the school or program fits the student's interests and needs, the next step is to make an appointment for a tour of the campus. Visiting the computer facilities as well as the disability support services program's office may offer a sense of how the school views students with disabilities and the accommodations, including assistive technology, that are available.

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