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ABC's of Accommodations

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ACCORDING to the most recent government figures, about 11 percent of undergraduates, or over two million students, have a disability. Most have learning disabilities, like dyslexia or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, but 15 percent have an orthopedic or mobility impairment; 6 percent have a hearing impairment; and 3 percent are blind or visually impaired.

Although elementary and secondary schools are required by law to attempt to identify students with a disability and document their needs, in college it is the responsibility of students to identify themselves and request services.

Disability offices recommend submitting documentation as soon as a college accepts you, or even reaching out before applying — if for no other reason than to see if a campus is suitable. Students in wheelchairs might not want to consider a college with lots of steep hills.

Colleges that accept a physically disabled student must at least make essential spaces — library, residence hall, lab, classrooms — accessible. For instance, if a student in a wheelchair wants to take a political science course that is usually held on the second floor of a building that doesn't have an elevator, reasonable accommodation would be to reschedule the entire class on the first floor.

But what is unreasonable? According to the government definition, an accommodation that would “fundamentally alter the nature of a program, lower or waive essential academic requirements, or result in undue financial or administrative burdens,” for example, installing elevators or new door openers in all buildings. Other accommodations considered unreasonable, said Susan Burns, associate dean for academic affairs at Morningside College, include expensive computer software, Braille readers or the salary for a personal assistant.

College disability officers consider it important that students meet with professors in advance of classes and will often accompany them to appointments. Once the college has determined appropriate accommodation arrangements, professors cannot refuse to comply with them.

“When I first meet a freshman with a physical disability,” Dean Burns said, “I assume that his or her expectations will be the same as the professors’ — namely that academic standards will not be lowered. On the other hand, how the disabled freshman relates to the professor will determine how the professor relates to the student. If they go to the professor assuming they will be treated like a second-class citizen, chances are they will probably be treated this way.”

Most colleges strive to achieve two goals. The first, according to Mirian Detres-Hickey, director of disability programs at Queens College in New York City, is to provide as normal a college experience as possible. “The purpose of accommodation,” Dr. Detres-Hickey said, “is to level the playing field for students with disabilities.”

The second goal is to encourage parents to back off and let their children take ownership over their lives. “Transition to college can be very difficult for these students, so being a self-advocate is huge,” said Karmen Ten Napel, a disabilities specialist at Morningside College. “When they were in high school, parents were their chief advocates. But in college and, even more so, when they leave college to go out into the real world, they must advocate for themselves.”