

## Students With Disabilities in Postsecondary Education Settings: How Occupational Therapy Can Help

The number of students with disabilities of all types participating in postsecondary education programs is increasing. Students with disabilities may attend a variety of postsecondary education programs, including vocational and career schools, 2-year community colleges, 4-year colleges and universities, or graduate and professional degree programs. In addition, a growing number of alternative postsecondary programs such as non-credit enrichment courses, vocational training, and social development programs are being developed for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Federal laws protect the rights of students with disabilities in postsecondary education settings. Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 requires that people with disabilities have equal access to public programs and services. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act ensures that programs receiving federal financial assistance do not discriminate on the basis of disability for otherwise qualified persons and that “reasonable accommodations” are provided (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Student Rights, 2011).



### The Role of Occupational Therapy

Postsecondary courses, activities, and environments often present new academic, independent living, social, vocational, and/or mobility demands for students with disabilities. Occupational therapy practitioners have a unique knowledge base to help support individuals who plan to enroll in or are attending postsecondary education programs. This includes a broad understanding of how illness, injury, or developmental disabilities affect participation and ways to address physical, cognitive, sensory, and psychosocial challenges. Occupational therapy practitioners have expertise in task analysis, adapting tasks to match an individual’s skills, assistive technology (both high and low tech), and modifying the environment to enable participation. This professional background makes occupational therapy practitioners well suited to help create universal as well as individualized supports and accommodations for students with disabilities that support access, participation, and success in postsecondary programs.

Occupational therapy practitioners can help youth who have disabilities prepare for postsecondary education as part of their high school transition plan as well as support youth and adults who are enrolled in postsecondary education programs by:

- Fostering the development of self-determination and self-advocacy skills starting early in life, as they help students understand and articulate their personal and disability-related needs, strengths, and useful supports.
- Helping individuals explore postsecondary programs, supports, and accommodations as part of their transition plan during the high school years as mandated through Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
- Helping students with disabilities understand their rights and responsibilities regarding self-disclosure, academic accommodations, and access to other supports in postsecondary settings.
- Teaching and fostering independence in the self-management of health-related needs, adaptive equipment, and assistive technology.

- Providing adaptive equipment or assistive technology devices and supports that enhance full participation and independence in academic and other daily life activities related to postsecondary education, such as personal care and mobility.
- Working with the student, family, postsecondary disability student services, and other providers to develop reasonable accommodations that may be needed to access or participate in academic, community living, or vocational environments and activities.
- Coaching students on the development of productive habits and daily routines that promote effective organization, time management, social interaction, and other skills necessary for postsecondary education success.

Occupational therapy educators working in postsecondary institutions also promote and facilitate equal access to campus environments and activities by:

- Educating school and campus administrators on strategies to include people with disabilities in all aspects of educational experiences.
- Advocating for the universal design of campus environments and activities.
- Applying principles of universal design of instruction in both traditional and distance learning programs.
- Developing innovative campus social supports for students with different types of disabilities.

### How and Where Are Services Provided?

Occupational therapy practitioners provide direct or consultative services for students who are enrolled in or plan to attend postsecondary education programs. They are part of the transition team that helps high school students who have individualized education programs (IEPs) plan for vocational, college, and independent living transitions as part of their IEP, as mandated by the IDEA. Occupational therapy practitioners are also part of the hospital- or community-based team that provides a full range of medical rehabilitation services to restore function. Occupational therapy practitioners may work in collaboration with other community or government agencies such as offices of Vocational Rehabilitation, state and county offices that provide developmental disabilities services, and in conjunction with student disability services offices at institutions of higher learning.

### Conclusion

Occupational therapy practitioners can help students with disabilities to identify and prepare for postsecondary programs best suited to their individual needs and vocational goals. By focusing on the match between the individual, the environment, and the required postsecondary activities, occupational therapy practitioners can help design accommodations, or the environmental or activity modifications needed to support participation in a wide range of postsecondary education programs and activities.

### References

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. (2011). *Students with disabilities preparing for postsecondary education: Know your rights and responsibilities* (rev. ed.). Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html>

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Occupational therapy enables people of all ages to live life to its fullest by helping them to promote health, make lifestyle or environmental changes, and prevent—or live better with—injury, illness, or disability. By looking at the whole picture—a client's psychological, physical, emotional, and social make up—occupational therapy assists people to achieve their goals, function at the highest possible level, maintain or rebuild their independence, and participate in the everyday activities of life.

