

Preparation is Key to Gaining Accommodations on ACT College Entrance Test

Planning for college requires much preparation, even more so if a student has a disability and requires accommodations on college entrance exams.

Students with disabilities receiving services through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are not automatically entitled to ACT or SAT testing accommodations, but must apply to use them.

Because the applications can require substantial documentation and months to process, families of youth with disabilities who plan to attend college and are entering ninth grade should begin preparing if accommodations are needed.

While there is no specific special education law that entitles students to accommodations on college entrance exams, individuals with disabilities are guaranteed certain protections and rights to equal access to programs and services under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and ADA amendments of 2008, as well as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

To access these rights when applying for accommodations on college entrance exams, an individual must present documentation of the disability and the necessity of the requested accommodation. Documentation is key to securing accommodations on the ACT test, says Jody Manning, PACER's Parent Training and Information Center Director.

"Parents should begin to consider planning for the ACT testing when their child starts high school in ninth grade," Manning says. "If planning for the ACT test seems appropriate for their child, they should definitely start thinking about it and make sure accommodations used by their child and the impact of those accommodations are well documented."

For the ACT, students may request one of the following accommodation categories:

- Standard Time National Testing with Accommodations
- Extended Time National Testing (50 percent time extension)
- Special Testing: Testing at school with extended time and alternate formats available—not as part of national or international testing at a test center.

The request must be supported by documentation of the disability that is written by the diagnosing professional and meets all of the following guidelines:

- States the specific impairment.
- Is current (within three years).
- Describes the presenting problems and developmental history, including relevant educational and medical history.
- Describes the comprehensive assessments (neuro-psychological or psycho-educational evaluations). ACT also requires other documentation, depending on the specific disability.
- Describes the substantial limitations resulting from the impairment.
- Describes specific recommended accommodations.
- Establishes the professional credentials for the evaluator, including information about licensure or certification, education, and area of specialization.

Parents and students usually work with school counselors on applications for college entrance exams, Manning says, but school counselors may not be aware of the ACT process for students with disabilities. For example, parents should know that if an initial application is rejected, they can apply again with additional data, such as the Individualized

Education Program (IEP) accommodations section, as well as progress notes or letters from teachers, coaches, and others who can substantiate the impact of the disability and the accommodation on the student's learning.

"Parents who have reapplied, even two or three times, and supplied additional documentation have been successful," Manning says.

Ed Colby, a spokesperson for ACT, says there is "no simple answer" for why an application is rejected. "Every case is looked at individually," he said. "If reviewers feel that there isn't a substantiated need, it will be denied, but it will depend on the information provided by the student, and they will have the opportunity to provide additional information if needed. We go to great lengths to make sure that students who need extended time or other accommodations for the ACT have the ability to receive them."

Parents can begin preparing the necessary documentation by making sure their child's accommodations are recorded in the IEP or 504 Plan, along with data that shows how the accommodation benefits the student.

"If accommodations are consistently used in the IEP plan, it will help on your application," Manning says. Manning points out that students who have 504 Plans should not be discouraged to apply for ACT accommodations. "If they have a strong 504 plan that shows accommodations are being used that benefit the student, as well as an outside neuro-psychological evaluation, students should apply for the special testing."

Timeline for Parents

Freshman Year: Make sure your child's accommodations are listed on the IEP or 504 Plan, along with data showing how they benefit your child.

Sophomore Year: Start gathering needed documentation. Check to see if your child's diagnosis documentation is current and meets the requirements of the ACT application. If not, update it.

Junior Year: Begin application process in the fall. Check ACT testing dates and registration dates online at actstudent.org. The ACT can be taken beginning in the spring of the junior year. National tests are given six times a year. ACT tests can be taken more than once.

Senior Year: Take ACT test again in the fall, if needed.

This handout is adapted from PACESETTER Newsletter, Fall 2011.

For details on requesting accommodations on the ACT, visit actstudent.org/regist/disab for complete details.

For more information about applying for accommodations on the ACT test, call 952-838-9000 and ask to speak to a PACER advocate. For information on postsecondary education, visit pacer.org/transition/learning-center/postsecondary/