

*Best Practice Guidelines for Accommodation Practices for Students with  
Disabilities at Virginia Public Higher Education Institutions*

## **Background**

The premise for this document originated from SCHEV's Disabilities Access to Higher Education Advisory Committee (the committee) input and identified priorities.

Specifically, the committee's **Action Plan to Address Higher Education Barriers faced by Students with Disabilities** identifies both access and success goals to develop guidelines for accommodation practices, including but not limited to:

1. standardized testing;
2. enhanced consistency across and within institutions;
3. regulatory relief for students' utilization of accommodations thereby reducing barriers to access and success; and
4. systematized information about accommodations.

The committee prioritized the development of these guidelines as part of the larger effort to implement the action plan. The overarching intent is to meet the needs of students with disabilities in higher education.

**The guidelines offered here are intended to clarify, promote and enable best practices in the field of disability access and accommodations and not be a substitute for any compliance framework(s) to which institutions of higher education may be subject.**

## **Need**

### **Attendance Rates**

Students with disabilities attend post-secondary institutions at a considerably lower rate than their non-disabled peers, partly because of the numerous additional hurdles they must clear before enrolling. The first potential impediment for student access and enrollment is standardized testing itself. Although testing companies are required by

law to offer accommodations, actually receiving an accommodation from a testing company for a disability can be a difficult process for students. And if a student fails to negotiate that process successfully, it can mean the difference between accessing and not accessing higher education at all.

### **Evaluations**

Another potential barrier for students with disabilities can be the cost of evaluations. After high school, a student may be required to obtain new disability documentation, which can run upwards of several thousand dollars, and require a significant investment of time and effort. Moreover, documentation requirements vary across, and sometimes within, institutions. There can also be wide discrepancies in the ability of families to bear the costs of documentation; the evaluations administered by medical or educational professionals; and insurance coverage limitations not to mention families' relative capacities to navigate institutional bureaucracies.

### **Documentation**

In addition to the lack of standardized admissions documentation requirements, there is a disconnect between the K-12 and higher education systems for assisting students with transitions. Perhaps the most difficult barrier for students and families is the lack of information about accommodation requirements, transition services and specialized programs, which can severely limit the educational opportunities for this population. Improved access and success for students with disabilities could result from strengthened partnerships that improve transition (high school to college) services and the provision of information about available resources and programs.

## **Purpose of the Guidelines**

These guidelines are intended to support equality of opportunity and access for students with disabilities both in comparison to all students and across institutions. Such purpose aligns with SCHEV's codified responsibilities

(<https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title23.1/chapter2/section23.1-203/>) including, but not necessarily limited to:

1. “Advocate for and promote the development and operation of an educationally and economically sound, vigorous, progressive, and coordinated system of higher education in the Commonwealth” (23.1-200).
2. “Develop a statewide strategic plan that...emphasizes the future needs for higher education in the Commonwealth at both the undergraduate and the graduate levels and the mission, programs, facilities, and location of each of the existing institutions of higher education, each public institution's six-year plan, and such other matters as the Council deems appropriate” (23.1-203, Duty #1).
3. “Develop a uniform, comprehensive data information system designed to gather all information necessary to the performance of the Council's duties. The system shall include information on admissions, enrollment, self-identified students with documented disabilities, personnel, programs, financing, space inventory, facilities, and such other areas as the Council deems appropriate” (23.1-203, Duty #9).
4. “Study the operations of each public institution of higher education at such times as the Council deems appropriate and conduct such other studies in the field of higher education” (23.1-203, Duty #13).
5. “Serve as the coordinating council for public institutions of higher education” (23.1-203, Duty #24).
6. “Insofar as practicable, preserve the individuality, traditions, and sense of responsibility of each public institution of higher education in carrying out its duties” (23.1-203, Duty #27).

SCHEV’s current statewide strategic plan for higher education, [\*The Pathways to Opportunity Plan\*](#), seeks to achieve an inclusive vision, “Best State for Education,” and equality of opportunity through removing barriers to access and attainment for all students, and explicitly references students with disabilities. The guidelines promulgated here are also supportive of Governor Youngkin’s Executive Order 10 (2022), which assigns to Virginia’s Chief Diversity, Opportunity & Inclusion Officer the responsibility “to expand entrepreneurship and economic opportunities for disadvantaged Virginians, **including Virginians living with disabilities.**”

## Principles

SCHEV via the Disabilities Access to Higher Education Committee established these accommodation guidelines based on the following principles:

1. **Shared Definition of Accommodation Practices:** Commonly define accommodation practices as an adjustment to a course, program, policy, service or activity that enables a qualified student with a disability to have an equal opportunity to access and use benefits, privileges and services that are available to a similarly situated student without disabilities and that doesn't compromise the integrity of the course or required content of the course. (Source: [Oregon State University](#)).
2. **Equality of Opportunity:** Provide "equality of opportunity." Enable students with disabilities to take advantage of the same opportunities as students without disabilities, to include programs, benefits, services and experiences across and within institutions. Equality of opportunity extends beyond accessibility and involves identifying and removing barriers through creating a culture of inclusion and acceptance of disability, as well as support from higher education leadership.
3. **Equality of Access:** Provide "equality of access." Ensure students with disabilities have equal opportunities as students without disabilities to access programs, services, and experiences across and within institutions. Identify and remove disability-related barriers, both physical and otherwise, through funding, staffing, program adjustments and other efforts to ensure access and ADA compliance.
4. **Least-Burdensome Practices:** Minimize burdensome practices that lead some students to give up seeking access to or completing higher education.
5. **Baseline Expectations:** Recognize that practices and operations are institutional responsibilities, but institutions shall at a minimum:
  - a. Seek student input to identify barriers to access and success in higher education via an established, ongoing mechanism (e.g. student advisory committee) that reflects each institution's diverse student population and programs.
  - b. Conduct a review of current policies, practices and opportunities for consistency with these Guidelines.
  - c. Develop a clear, accessible public facing statement of the rights and resources available to students with disabilities. Seek Board of Visitors adoption of a policy on student accommodation practices in accord with these guidelines to steward better practices and "equality of access and opportunity" for students with disabilities.
7. Require annual foundational compliance training for all college employees, including adjunct teaching faculty and for all student employees in student-facing roles on Section 504, the Americans with Disabilities Act (as amended), and college guidelines and

practices related to accommodations for students with disabilities. Leverage any existing resources to the extent possible (i.e., DARS and UVA training materials).

8. Incorporate information on accommodations into practices and processes specific to each Virginia institution.
9. **Academic Integrity:** Ensure that accommodations provided to students with disabilities do not lower academic standards or compromise the integrity of an academic program.
10. **Inclusive Environment:** Create an environment that is welcoming to all students, environmentally, programmatically and socially in which students with disabilities feel included in all aspects of the higher education experience. Institutions should identify and address academic, environmental, and attitudinal barriers that students with disabilities face, such as:
  - a. Physical accessibility (e.g., a lack of accessible furniture in the classroom; location of classes; steps no elevators);
  - b. Digital accessibility (e.g., a lack of captioning on videos); restrictive policies (e.g., a course attendance policy that poses a challenge for a student with a chronic health condition); or
  - c. Attitudinal barriers, including myths and stereotypes, and a lack of awareness and understanding about different disabilities and disability culture. (See [AHEAD White Paper: professional-resources/white-papers-guiding-documents/intellectual-disabilities-white-paper](#))

## **Institutional Best Practice Guidelines for Accommodation Practices**

Institutions should use the “Best Practice Guidelines for Accommodation Practices” to review institutional policies and bring any changes as a result of these guidelines to their Board of Visitors for approval/endorsement.

### **Admissions Guidelines**

#### **Standardized Testing/Admissions Requirements**

1. With test-optional, what do institutions require besides high school transcripts, letters of recommendation and essays? K-12 uses portfolios in place of standards of learning (SOLs) for some students with disabilities. Consider other admissions documents/materials beyond transcripts and letters of recommendation.
  - a. Placement tests
  - b. Standardized tests or alternatives

- c. Placement or self-enrollment in developmental or college-level classes with access to additional remediation and support services.
2. What courses do Virginia IHEs require for admissions? What are the appropriate course requirement accommodations for students with disabilities so that they can meet those admissions requirements? Where and how are these requirements communicated to students, parents and high schools?
  - a. For example, for a specific learning disability, when there is an unnecessary burden, can an alternative course fulfill this requirement or can the institution allow an exception if they take the SAT/ACT and their scores match the average profile of a freshman at the institution?
  - b. What are the options and do they apply to all schools?
  - c. An example is the foreign language requirement or the equivalent.

### **Admissions Website and Campus Tours**

1. Admissions tours and admissions websites should include information about the entrance process for students with disabilities (e.g., provide them with information regarding when and how they should apply for accommodations and include this on the admissions webpage). This should include information as outlined in the previous section (standardized testing and admissions requirements).
2. The admissions office webpages should provide information on existing accessibility on the campus, in programs, in accommodations as well as how to ask for accommodations so that students can decide whether they want to tour or apply. Information, at a minimum should include:
  - a. Accessible parking
  - b. Accessible routes
  - c. How to request accommodations for campus visits and programs (e.g. orientation)
  - d. Statement explaining the institution's commitment to accessibility and inclusivity.
3. The admissions office webpages should refer as well to the disability services webpage(s).
4. The disabilities office webpage should include links, at a minimum, to:
  - a. Academic advising
  - b. Athletics
  - c. Financial aid
  - d. Student life
  - e. Resident life
  - f. Health services
  - g. Counseling services
5. Include reference to level of service provided by IHE as specified below.

### *Levels of Services Offered by Colleges*

Level of Services	Description
Level 1	<p>Schools that provide only what is required by the law offer basic (sometimes referred to as <b>compliance-level</b> or <b>compliance-only</b>) services, meaning that their services meet only the minimum that the law requires.</p> <p>Level 1 services typically include only those required by law in order to provide “access” (Banerjee &amp; Brinckerhoff, 2009; Elksnin &amp; Elksnin, 2009; McGuire, 2009).</p> <p>This means that they provide basic accommodations such as extended time for exams or permission to record lectures, but don’t typically offer what might be seen as “services” (e.g., special tutoring or special advising)</p>
Level 2	<p>Level 2 includes Level 1 plus the following: Colleges providing Level 2 services may offer special classes or workshops in study skills and time management.</p> <p>They may have a full-time staff member training students to use assistive technology (AT) or offer one-on-one time with a learning specialist or academic coach to help students learn study strategies, gain an understanding of their learning profiles, develop self-advocacy skills, and use compensatory techniques – typically for free.</p>
Level 3	<p>Level 3 includes the prior levels and expanded fee-for-service programs that may include content-area tutoring, academic coaching, or specialized academic or career advising. These specialized programs can cost several thousand dollars a semester in addition to baseline college costs.</p>

### **Documentation Guidelines**

The following Documentation Guidelines shall be used to establish eligibility for disability services not to determine accommodations for individual students.

1. Adopt **least** burdensome documentation protocol necessary to establish the need for accommodation(s). Base this protocol on universally accepted documentation guidelines from AHEAD as outlined below.
  - a. Universally accepted, least burdensome documentation should be guided by <https://www.ahead.org/professional-resources/accommodations/documentation>:
    - i. Primary Documentation: Student self-report;
    - ii. Secondary Documentation: Observation and interaction; and/or
    - iii. Tertiary Documentation: Information from external and third parties.
      1. Ability to utilize any (components of) pre-existing documentation (i.e., Student Individualized Education Program/IEP or 504 plan or accommodation letter from prior institution) as documentation of a disability that requires accommodation).
      2. In addition to AHEAD-specified guidance, include under allowed sources of professional judgement: Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and Evaluators and their documentation as acceptable proof for higher education accommodations. Consider also including/accepting disability and accommodation information/recommendations from certain credentialed professionals including Certified Rehabilitation Counselors (CRCs) and Certified Vocational Evaluators (CVEs).
      3. Note the appropriateness of documentation may differ on a case-by-case basis (i.e., visible disability as clear case for using solely, primary or secondary levels of documentation).
      4. Consider the date(s) of the evaluation and nature of diagnosis, as well as the burden on the student to obtain updated documentation. The documentation should be **relevant** to the accommodation being requested.
  - b. If additional documentation is requested, offer some form of temporary support or accommodation to students while waiting to receive documentation by agreed upon date. **Final determination of eligibility for accommodations should be made by the disability services office (or equivalent) based on all of the available information.**
  - c. Allow transferability of documentation from one school to the other in the case of transfers. For example, a sample accommodation notification memo document to consider as a basic template.
3. Provide examples in required training for DSO staff:
  - a. Adopt least burdensome documentation protocol necessary to establish the need for accommodation. Base this protocol on universally accepted documentation guidelines from AHEAD as outlined below.
  - b. Universally accepted, least burdensome documentation should be guided by <https://www.ahead.org/professional-resources/accommodations/documentation>:

- i. Primary Documentation: Student self-report;
- ii. Secondary Documentation: Observation and interaction; and/or
- iii. Tertiary Documentation: Information from external and third parties.
  1. Ability to utilize any (components of) pre-existing documentation (i.e., Student Individualized Education Program/IEP or 504 plan or accommodation letter from prior institution) as documentation of a disability that requires accommodation).
  2. In addition to AHEAD-specified guidance, include under allowed sources of professional judgement: Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and Evaluators and their documentation as acceptable proof for higher education accommodations. Consider also including/accepting disability and accommodation information/recommendations from certain credentialed professionals including Certified Rehabilitation Counselors (CRCs) and Certified Vocational Evaluators (CVEs).
  3. Note the appropriateness of documentation may differ on a case-by-case basis (i.e., visible disability as clear case for using solely, primary or secondary levels of documentation).
  4. Consider the date(s) of the evaluation and nature of diagnosis, as well as the burden on the student to obtain updated documentation. The documentation should be relevant to the accommodation being requested.
- c. If additional documentation is requested, offer some form of temporary support or accommodation to students while waiting to receive documentation by agreed upon date. **Final determination of eligibility for accommodations should be made by the disability services office (or equivalent) based on all of the available information.**

## Accommodation Guidelines

1. Implement practices to reduce the burden on students to establish and utilize accommodations, such as:
  - a. Comprehensive trainings or other educational sessions for faculty so they are aware of students' rights to accommodations and can direct them to the right points of contact/offices on campus to request accommodations. Identify the entity that will be responsible for developing and providing the training and how consistency (recognizing some variability) across institutions will be achieved.
  - b. Universal training for faculty on their responsibility to provide reasonable accommodations for students with legitimate requests unless it creates an

unreasonable burden on the faculty member. Training should be provided on an annual basis.

- i. What the accommodations could/should entail with the recognition that no one listing can provide all of the accommodations that a particular student may need as it is individual to that student. Institutions need to be flexible in this regard.
  - ii. Training should explain and provide clear examples of what constitutes undue burden and the process of what should be done in cases where it is found to be an undue burden.
  - iii. How to achieve those accommodations in adherence with the principles set forth in this document (pages 3-4).
2. Establish some form of standard accommodation documentation memo between students and faculty for use across an institution. Remove intra-institutional disparities, i.e., where some schools have more generous policies than others do, go to the highest common denominator.
3. Consider adoption of standardized (or at least core components of), accommodation notification memo across all public institutions.
4. Provide a dedicated, comprehensive web resource on accommodations as part of each institution's web presence to include, at minimum:
  - a. Definition of what constitutes "accommodation practices."
  - b. Links to the institution's accommodations documentation forms, policies and procedures and personnel.
  - c. Information on the availability and location of equipment and technology useful to students with disabilities.
  - d. Accessible wayfinding information.
  - e. Dispute resolution/complaint procedures.
  - f. Student rights (under the law) and in the IHE, including appeal rights if accommodations are denied.
  - g. Self-advocacy resources to help students feel comfortable in asking for needed accommodations.
  - h. Links to available resources/supports across the institution and any additional, critical external resources. For example, PEATC provides a resource that identifies specific programs at colleges for students with disabilities. <https://peatc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Specialized-College-Programs-in-Virginia-for-Students-with-Disabilities.pdf>
  - i. Section of information for parents: How to request access to information (student permission required for parent access unless the parent has legal paperwork giving them access rights) and any parent-specific resources for helping their child advocate for accommodations.

- j. Accommodation resources, information translated in various languages to ensure equality of access for English language learners.
  - k. Section of information for faculty, including information about the student accommodation process and the faculty rights/responsibilities in this process.
5. Expound on each accommodation practice as per the above definition and establish the fundamental guidelines for each area, where appropriate with the recognition that no list can be all-inclusive.

### **Guidelines for Inclusion at Virginia's Higher Education Institutions**

1. Establish a students with disabilities advisory committee and consult with it (at minimum) annually on the effectiveness of student supports and potential improvements.
  - a. Include representation from students with a variety of disabilities and chronic conditions ranging from: visible disabilities, mild to severe disabilities, varying levels of ability to invisible disabilities and presence of condition (cyclical vs. constant).
  - b. Consider peer-mentoring programs as a research-based effective practice for improving graduation rates for students with disabilities (SWDs) as well as reducing the stigma on campus for SWDs. This could be an action item for the SWDs advisory committee if they are located at the IHE.
  - c. Incorporate student input on what they feel the barriers are via a focus group, survey etc.
2. Develop a disability identity/culture so that students feel a sense of belonging as it relates to their disability identity and so it does not serve as a barrier to access or success.
3. In addition to the compliance work of Disabilities Services offices at the institution, institutions should support the funding and staffing required to ensure that students with disabilities can access all campus-wide programming. This could include establishing a central access fund to address accessibility issues vs. funding taken from a departmental budget.
4. Encourage IHEs to foster the sense of belonging for students with disabilities. Doing so will develop community and ally-ship, which will positively impact the student experience.
5. Foster accessibility and inclusion within student organizations on campus. This includes training on accessibility for leadership and administrators and establishing accessibility guidelines for community/campus events.

## SCHEV Actions in Support of Guidelines

SCHEV offers to take the following actions in support of the accommodation guidelines as defined in this document:

1. SCHEV, via the Disabilities Access to Higher Education Advisory Committee, will develop an assessment tool for institutions to conduct their own internal review of current policies, practices and opportunities for consistency with these Best Practice Guidelines. The self-assessment can help identify institutional strengths, best practices, areas for improvement and steps needed to better align with the “Best Practice Guidelines for Accommodation Practices” document (this document).
2. Include on SCHEV’s dedicated webpage, links to each institution’s dedicated webpages for accommodations (as specified above).
  - a. Include also: PEATC provides a resource that identifies specific programs at colleges for students with disabilities. SCHEV can share it. <https://peatc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Specialized-College-Programs-in-Virginia-for-Students-with-Disabilities.pdf> and <https://peatc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/4-Year-College-Disability-Support-Services.pdf>
  - b. Dissemination of SCHEV’s 2-year and 4-year access work and video series to advisory committee members and other appropriate points of contact.
3. Seek SCHEV’s Student Advisory Council (SAC) representation on SCHEV’s Disabilities Access to Higher Education Advisory Committee.

## Appendix

Sample Accommodation Memo to serve as a template.



DISABILITY SERVICES OFFICE

123 Administration Building | Anycollege, USA | 999.555.0000

### LETTER OF ACCOMMODATION

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Semester: \_\_\_\_\_

Today's date: \_\_\_\_\_ Valid from: \_\_\_\_\_ through: \_\_\_\_\_

Federal legislation including the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 state that academically qualified students with disabilities must be reasonably accommodated in instruction and academic assessment. A disability is legally defined as a physical or mental impairment substantially limiting one or more major life activities.

This letter verifies that the above-named student has undergone a needs assessment with Disabilities Services and it was determined that he/she has a disability requiring the academic accommodations or services listed below.

The accommodations checked below are those to which this student is entitled:

- ☐ Extended testing time
- ☐ Reduced-noise testing environment
- ☐ Word processing for essay tests
- ☐ Note taker
- ☐ Use of device for recording lectures
- ☐ Interpreter, ASL, for lectures and oral exams
- ☐ Electronic books or books on tape

DS accommodations are intended to provide equal access as required by law. Revisions to accommodations may occur pending additional information, changes in disability status, or by periodic review. Faculty is encouraged to work collaboratively with the student and to seek support from DS as needed. Please contact DS with questions or concerns regarding the provision of accommodations and services.

Sincerely,

DS Coordinator  
Hamblet University