



DISABILITY SUPPORTS

Disability Office

Nearly all post-secondary campuses will have an office that supports students with disabilities or learning challenges.

At your school, it may be called:

- Disability Office or Disability Services
- Accessibility Centre or Accessibility Services
- Student Success Centre
- Student Accessibility Centre
- Or, other combinations of these terms

Whatever it is called, these offices aim to promote access and equity for all types of students in post-secondary education, including Autistic students.

What's Different?

In high school, you may have received support or accommodations and you may have utilized an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). In post-secondary, you will need to make an appointment with the disability office in order to find out what the requirements are for you to access personalized accommodations. This is where you'll need to practice self-agency (or self-advocacy) by being proactive in ensuring your educational needs are being met.

The best time to go to the disability office is prior to starting your first semester. Even if you have not enrolled in courses, you can contact the disability office and ask for information or inquire if you can make an appointment to discuss your needs.

If you have already enrolled, set up an appointment right away with a staff member in disability services. Don't forget to check out your post-secondary's disability webpage, as there's often important information listed. They may also have a FAQ section and information about the types of accommodations they offer students.

Documents to consider taking to your meeting with a disability staff member:

- A copy of your diagnosis
- Past IEP to help you discuss your current needs
- Doctor's letter for any other unique accommodations you might need
- Documentation of co-occurring medical conditions
- Any questions you might have regarding your learning needs

Most post-secondary institutions require a formal diagnosis to access any type of accommodations. As well, most post-secondary institutions do not offer autism

AUTISM CAMPUS PREP

specific accommodations but rather offer general accommodations for physical disabilities and learning disabilities and hope that it fits your needs. If you find that your needs are not being met by the accommodations provided, talk to the staff in the disability office to determine if there are other options available.

Things to know about the disability office:

- Professional staff members in the office want you to succeed. They chose their role because of their commitment to equity, inclusion, and diversity in the learning environment
- If you find the accommodations you've been provided are not working or you are not receiving accommodations from instructors that you were meant to receive, go back to your disability services office and discuss this with the staff. They are there to help you
- Disability services are bound by human rights legislation as well as disability rights in Canada and therefore they must comply with your right to equitable access to education
- It's ok to check in with disability services if you have questions no matter where you are along the process of your education
- The disability office offers services that pertain to academic programming. Supports for non-academic issues can usually be obtained elsewhere on campus in places like the Student Health Centre

Accommodation

In post-secondary education, accommodations are given to students with documented disabilities. Unlike high school where the school is responsible for ensuring accommodations are given to the students who require them, students in post-secondary must be proactive and seek the accommodations they need through the office of disability services. Accommodations can take many forms and may be administered in classrooms, online classrooms, or for examinations.

Reasonable accommodations in post-secondary education may include:

- A note taker in class
- The ability to reserve a seat in class
- Receiving notes or slides 24 hours prior to class
- Access to examples of previous work
- Clear rubric of assignments, expectations, and grading expectations
- Allowing lights to be dimmed or turned off
- Alternatives to group work
- Longer exam times
- Access to separate exam rooms
- Use of a laptop to type versus write by hand
- Use of sound isolating headphones to manage exposure to sounds

AUTISM CAMPUS PREP

Accommodations may not be given in every class or for every program. In certain programs, the essential requirement of the program may not allow accommodations to be made. For example, a first-responder paramedic program may not be able to accommodate changes to the requirements that pertain to the ability to handle traumatic medical emergency events.

Advice about accommodations:

- Even if you do not think you will require accommodations, it is best to register with the disability office prior to starting your program in order to mitigate any challenges that may come later on. Some post-secondary institutions limit your time frame for signing up for accommodations to the first two weeks of each semester
- Make a thorough self-assessment prior to the beginning your post-secondary education to determine what is the best program fit for your interests, skills, and abilities and what accommodations might help you reach your goals
- Determine what accommodations you may need within the program you choose
- Reach out to potential educational facilities to find out whether the accommodations they offer are a fit with your needs

Gathering Documentation

Almost all post-secondary institutions require clear documentation of your diagnosis as well as any co-occurring medical challenges and any specific letters from your doctor, counsellor, psychologist, etc. that might be helpful in developing an accommodation plan for you.

Documentation is normally considered valid if it was given within the last 3 years. If your documentation is older than that, you might need to reach out to your provider for a more current letter. It's best to have this done prior to your first semester.

Documentation can include a psychoeducational assessment, which could cost upwards of a few thousand dollars. Obtaining such an assessment can be a slow process, given referral and wait times.

***i* Recommendation:** Reach out to the disability office before you apply to your chosen school and determine what documentation you will need. If you are still in high school, and the documentation you have (e.g., an IEP) is not enough, you might be able to convince your school to pay for a psychoeducational assessment.

Assistive Technology

Assistive technology includes any device, app, equipment, or software that allows people to enhance their ability to participate in society and in this case, post-secondary education. Assistive technology can include high tech equipment such as laptop computers, screen readers, alerting devices, screen magnifiers, text-to-speech apps, electronic note-takers and more. Low-tech tools include pencil grips, highlighters, post-it-notes, and fidgets.

If you require assistive technology that you cannot afford, speak to a staff member in the disability services to determine what options may exist. If your post-secondary institution is not able to provide you with assistive technology you require for equitable access to education, speak to your local autism organization or disability services organization for potential resources.

Peer Mentoring

Most post-secondary institutions offer a peer-mentoring program that is often developed through a student-led initiative.

Peer mentors are fellow students who are usually one or two years further into their programs and therefore have a better understanding of what resources are available for mental health, wellness, study skills, etc.

These mentorship programs can usually be accessed through a particular school program such as undergraduate programs or graduate programs or through the accessibility office, peer mentorship office (if available), or student support services.

Joining a peer mentorship program can help support your wellbeing by giving you insight from another student's perspective.

Peer mentors might:

- Suggest clubs you can join
- Make referrals to other areas of the school that you might be interested in
- Give you resources to assist you in different areas of your educational life

Some peer mentorship programs require a commitment of time as they may be linked to a research project or be part of the mentor's program requirements. For example, you may be required to meet with your mentor at regular intervals and you may need to give feedback along the way. It is important that you ask yourself some questions before committing to work with a peer mentor.

Questions might include:

- Am I able to meet with a mentor on a regular schedule?

AUTISM CAMPUS PREP

- Is it easy for me to get to these appointments?
- Will meeting with a mentor regularly give me the support I need?
- What are my options if I don't 'fit' with the mentor?
- Will this add to my stress or decrease my stress levels?

Community Advisors

Some students live on campus while attending post-secondary.

A *Community Advisor* or *Residence Life Coordinator* is a person whose role is to maintain a friendly, open, and inclusive environment in student housing facilities on campus.

They act as role models, event coordinators, peer counselors, a resource person, a policy enforcer, and they are trained to deal with crisis situations that may come up in the residence halls.

Talking to a Residence Life Coordinator or senior administrator in the residence office prior to enrolling in the post-secondary institution can give you insight into what options might be available for you in residence halls.

For example, you may be able to access on-campus housing modifications, or request a dorm room on the quieter side of the building. You will likely need documentation of your diagnosis and be signed up with disability services as well.



You may also be required to fill out a form regarding your disability that seeks information regarding:

- The specific nature of your request
- What you believe your needs are
- The measures you are currently taking in your current living situation to address your needs

Though filling out a form does not obligate the college or university to meet your needs, it is a good idea to do so if required to ensure that your request is considered.

The earlier that your request is made prior to your start date, the more likely that you can be accommodated in residence halls. Accommodations to your living space on campus can also be discussed with the disability services office staff member.