

Becoming College Bound: An Overview of the Admissions Process and Eligibility Criteria for Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability

By Carly Gilson, PhD, and Alison Prah, PhD

Preparing for college is an exciting and stressful process often filled with anticipation and uncertainty. It is important for prospective students, their families, and educators to understand the admissions process and expectations that inclusive postsecondary education programs hold for incoming students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Although it is quite different from the traditional college admissions process, there are many similarities. However, there is no standardized admissions process for postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability, which can leave prospective students and families with a lot of questions and confusion about the process and the eligibility criteria required to “think college.”

In a research study published in *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, Gilson and colleagues (2024) summarize a mixed methods study that explored the admissions process and eligibility criteria for programs that support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The researchers used a national online survey and virtual interviews with postsecondary education program staff to learn about the skills, behaviors, and qualities most commonly valued during the admissions process. They also explored the steps and timeline of the admissions process. Research participants represented 62 programs across 32 states. The study’s findings revealed that postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability generally prioritized functional skills and social behaviors rather than academic skills. In this article, we will demystify the admissions process by highlighting the key take-aways from the study and share helpful tips for prospective students, families, and educators to prepare for college.

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What are the components of the admissions process?

The admissions process differs across programs, but many share common elements within a multi-step process. Here we describe the common elements and general timeline. Although each postsecondary education program puts its own spin on the admissions journey, the process is designed to help everyone—students, families, and staff—find the right fit, and it can be an exciting first step toward an incredible college experience!

- ❑ **Open house (attend prior to applying):** Many programs host in-person or online open houses, which are open to prospective students, families, educators, and community members. One interviewee shared that they hope the open house helps students “envision themselves on campus.”
- ❑ **Educational documents (prepare prior to applying):** When preparing for college, it is important to ensure that the applicant’s documents are up to date and accurately reflect their educational history so far. This includes their high school transcripts and evidence of diploma, certificate, or formal exit from high school. If the applicant received special education services in a public school, they would need to include the most recent version of their Individualized

Education Program (IEP). This should include any relevant addendum documents, such as a Behavior Intervention Plan and transition planning documents. Additionally, many programs recommend that applicants have a recent psychological evaluation within the last three years, which shows the documented diagnosis of intellectual disability, as designated by a psychological or medical professional. Admissions teams will review these documents, with particular attention to transition planning goals, relevant assessments, accommodations and modifications, and related services.

- ❑ **Online application (fall):** Most postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability have an online application that is hosted and facilitated separately from the university's standard application process. Typically, program applications open in late fall for admission the following fall. It is important to note that the program application is different from the application for the host university. There is also not a common application; instead, each program has a separate application form and process.

The application includes sections for the parent or guardian to complete as well as sections for the applicant to complete independently. Typical sections include:

- demographics
- goals for college related to academics, employment, and daily living
- listing of support needs
- rating scales and open-ended items to self-evaluate level of independence across various scales
- relevant document uploads

Many applications will also ask for letters of recommendation or reference information for someone who knows the applicant well but is not a family member (e.g., educator, therapist, community member). It is helpful to include at least one reference from someone who has been able to observe the applicant in an educational or employment setting, such as a teacher, job coach, or employment supervisor.

- ❑ **Screener interview (late fall/early spring):** Postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability typically conduct two rounds of interviews. The first is a short, 10–15-minute screener interview conducted via Zoom or another virtual platform with the applicant and 1–2 staff members. Questions will often pertain to the applicant's goals, understanding why they want to come to college, and what they hope to gain from the experience. Parents and family members are typically not present for these interviews. Interviewers commonly use rubrics to evaluate the extent to which the applicant is motivated to pursue higher education, has goals that align with a college pathway, and has a reliable form of communication in place.

- ❑ **Campus interview (spring/summer):** If the applicant advances in the process, they will often be invited to another longer interview that may be virtual or in-person as part of an all-day visit to campus. Applicants and their families will attend the visits together but may spend the day doing different activities. Applicants may often participate in interviews separately from their parents or family members.

The applicant interview will include a longer discussion of goals and in-depth scenarios to assess problem-solving, time management, and critical thinking skills. Other applicant activities may include participating in campus activities (e.g., attending class, peer-led activities) as well as formal and informal assessments. Some programs have a scavenger hunt activity where applicants, with support from peers or program staff, are tasked with finding buildings or landmarks around campus. Peers or program staff may observe applicants during these activities using rubrics or checklists to assess their independence and competence in skills related to navigation, safety, problem solving, money management, and seeking help when needed.

The parent and family interview will include a discussion about the applicant's support needs, the staffing and support model of the program, and expectations for family involvement and communication if

the applicant enrolls. Due to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the communication process in college is very different from high school, which may surprise some families.

Some programs invite finalists to campus for a 1–2-week extended stay in the summer, which may be before or after a student has officially been admitted to the program. During the extended campus visit, the admissions committee observes students on campus.

What skills are valued in postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability?

The admissions committee may include a mixture of program staff, faculty, current students, peers, alumni, and community members to provide a range of perspectives in the admissions process. Here are some of the skills, behaviors, and qualities most evaluated and valued during the admissions process:

- **Applicant demographics:** Most postsecondary programs have a minimum age of 18. For those programs that stated a maximum age, it ranged from 21- to 26-years-old. However, many programs do not have a strict upper age limit. Most programs require documented diagnosis of intellectual disability. Guardianship was often not factored into admission decisions.
- **Applicant goals:** Overwhelmingly, successful applicants to programs had a genuine desire to attend college and a desire to attain a job in an inclusive employment setting.
- **Daily living skills:** Postsecondary programs value independence in basic daily living skills (e.g., toileting, hygiene), administering medication and meeting dietary needs, managing unsupervised time appropriately, following a schedule, and using basic technology. Household chores and public transportation skills are not required because they are considered skills that one can learn in college.
- **Communication skills:** Students must have a reliable form of communication to convey



wants, desires, and needs through verbal or speech alternatives. Some programs require communication skills in writing or text format.

- **Employability skills:** Most programs do not require formal work experience; however, a desire to work and skills such as communication, punctuality, and appropriate work behavior are highly valued.
- **Adaptive behavior skills:** Students with intellectual disability accepted to a postsecondary education program are expected to be able to manage their behavior across all settings (e.g., classrooms, residence halls, workplace) and adhere to the university's student code of conduct, which prohibits abuse, sexual misconduct, plagiarism, and other types of inappropriate behaviors. The program staff will ask students to disclose any history of aggressive behaviors at the outset of the admissions process and share how the applicant and their family have a plan to address it during college.
- **Time management skills:** Most programs do not have 24/7 support or supervision of the students, especially those with residential components. Thus, the successful applicant should be ready to manage their time appropriately, which includes being able to arrive at class on time and knowing how to spend their leisure time independently and safely.
- **Adaptability skills:** The successful applicant will also be able to adapt to unexpected changes in their day or routine and show flexibility and openness when meeting new people or being exposed to new environments or scenarios.

- **Academic skills:** Interestingly, academic skills were the least prioritized domain in admissions considerations for postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability. Less than one-third of the programs included had criteria related to reading, math, or writing skills. Staff members described how assistive technology has transformed the way that many students access academic content.
- **Functional academic skills.** On the other hand, functional literacy was highly valued, which pertains to reading street signs, restaurant menus, or electronic communication via email or text messaging. Successful applicants will also have competencies related to functional math, such as basic numeracy and telling time. Among the few programs that did have specific eligibility criteria related to formal reading or math, they often ranged from 3rd–5th-grade levels.

How can we start preparing for college now?

Prospective students (ages 14+)

- Seek opportunities for leadership in IEP meetings and during the planning process
- Form relationships with people outside your family, like teachers or coaches
- Get involved in extracurricular clubs or organizations
- Learn about options by reviewing [Think College Search directory of programs](#).
- Attend open houses and learn about different programs to figure out what you want from a college program
- Practice spending nights away from home in a short-term transition program or summer camp to get a sense of what being in college would feel like
- Know your **why**: what motivates you to go to college and what do you hope to get out of it

Families

- Work with the IEP team to include goals in your child’s IEP that help prepare them for college ([Read Individualized Education Program \(IEP\) Goal Ideas to Support College Readiness for ideas](#))
- Review options in the [Think College Search directory](#) of programs with your child
- Attend open houses and webinars to learn about many postsecondary programs to discover the best fit for your family
- Encourage your children to take ownership of their decisions at a young age
- Teach and practice self-determination behaviors at home, including autonomous decision-making

Educators

- Start the transition planning conversations early
- Set your expectations high—college is a possibility for your students!
- Consider a balanced approach between a functional and academic curriculum
- Teach and encourage self-determination behaviors at school
- Integrate more access to assistive technology to promote functional literacy skills (e.g., text to speech, audiobooks)
- Identify admissions criteria for students with intellectual disability and align expectations accordingly

IEP teams

- Consider a backward planning approach when crafting IEPs for students with college aspirations. For example, have early, candid conversations about the pathways to college and design goals that target skills aligned with specific program criteria.

5 Most Common Admissions Criteria

1. Desire to attend college
2. Independence in basic daily living skills (e.g., toileting, hygiene)
3. Communicates wants, desires, needs (verbal or speech alternatives)
4. Documented diagnosis of intellectual disability
5. Desire to attain a job in an inclusive employment setting

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Full Research Article:

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