**Self-Advocacy Activity:**

**Disability Disclosure in Postsecondary Education**

**Disability Disclosure in Higher Education**: Welcome to our activity on Disability Disclosure in Higher Education. After high school, students may decide to transition into a postsecondary education setting. These settings include technical schools, community and junior colleges, universities, other vocational training settings, and inclusive higher education programs. In higher education settings, students will have to make a decision on whether or not to disclose their disability to their school or training program. In this activity video, we’ll respond to frequently asked questions, discuss strategies for instruction on disclosure, and consider the potential outcomes of disclosing a disability in higher education.

**Inclusive Higher Education in Tennessee**: Before we discuss disability disclosure in detail, it is important to note that inclusive higher education programs are designed for students with intellectual disabilities. In Tennessee, these programs include Next Steps at Vanderbilt University, TigerLIFE at University of Memphis, FUTURE program at University of Tennessee, IDEAL program at Lipscomb University, EDGE program at Union University, and ACCESS at East Tennessee State University. These programs are only for students with disabilities, so the application process may require documentation of a disability. If you have students interested in these programs, remember to look up their admission requirements and be sure that your students understand that they will need to disclose their disability when applying.

**Rights and Responsibilities in Higher Education:** As students transition from high school to a postsecondary setting, it is important that they are aware of the changes to their rights and responsibilities. While in high school, it is the responsibility of the school to make sure that students get the accommodations, interventions, and services in order to provide a free and appropriate education (FAPE). This includes identifying students who may have a disability, and providing interventions, services, and accommodations. Postsecondary settings are not required to provide FAPE. Students must advocate for their needs and disclose their disability if they want accommodations. Accommodations can be put in place to allow equal opportunities and keep students free from discrimination.

**Instruction in Self-Advocacy**: In order to make an informed decision about disclosing their disability in postsecondary settings, students need instruction in self-advocacy. They need opportunities to advocate for themselves while still in high school. By the time students graduate, they need to be able to understand their disability, identify supports, and be responsible for their own success. They need to take appropriate high school classes that support their goals while looking up the admission requirements for the program they want to attend.

**Disclosure Questions**: As students explore their postsecondary options, there are many questions that they may have about what disclosure looks like in higher education. They may wonder about the process, requirements, and options of disclosing their disability. Some frequently asked questions are…

**FAQ’s of Disability Disclosure:**

When applying to postsecondary programs, are students required to share their disability information?

Students are not required to disclose that they have a disability at any point unless they wish to request accommodations. Disclosure is a personal decision that should be based on the needs of the student. However, if students want accommodations, the student must disclose that they have a disability and submit any required documentation.

Can a student be turned away because they have a disability?

No. Programs cannot turn students away solely because they have a disability. However, students are required to meet any standard admission requirements. Postsecondary programs are not required to make modifications to their requirements for students with disabilities. For example, if a school requires a minimum standardized test score, and the student does not obtain that score, they can be denied admission.

If students decide to disclose so they can get accommodations, what paperwork do they need to have?

Documentation requirements are not the same for every postsecondary program. Students need to research what documents they will need in order to request accommodations. The documentation needs to explain how their disability impacts their ability to learn or function within their daily life. IEPs and 504 plans may not be sufficient to gain access to accommodations. It is possible that the program will ask for updated evaluations. In this case, the student will be financially responsible. Unlike high school, the postsecondary program does not have to provide these evaluations.

Where do students go to disclose their disability? Who do they talk to?

Every postsecondary program should have its own process for how students disclose their disability and request accommodations, so encourage or help students to find this information. Typically, there is a Disability Services office where office staff meet with students to choose appropriate accommodations and assist them with setting-up any services. This staff member is usually available on an as-need basis, not as someone who enforces or ensures that the student will receive the supports. That is the student’s job.

What do students need to know before they go to Disability Services?

Students transitioning from high school to postsecondary programs need to have strong self-advocacy skills. They need to know that they still have a right to confidentiality. They need to know what their disability is and know the supports they need. They need to understand that Disability Services functions very differently than the supports they received in high school. Students should be prepared to communicate their needs and take charge of their own learning.

**Practice Disability Disclosure**:

[B-Roll video footage begins playing. Video cuts to students in a university classroom. Video cuts to a campus map. Video cuts to a panel discussion of young adult leaders. Video cuts to members of the panel discussion audience. Video cuts to a group of young adult students taking a tour of Vanderbilt’s campus. Video cuts to a group of students walking through Vanderbilt’s campus. Video cuts to two young women eating in a campus dining hall. Visit cuts to small group of students entering a university building. Video cuts to group of students in student center on campus.

Regardless of whether or not a student plans to disclose in their higher education program, it is beneficial to practice disability disclosure prior to transitioning into a postsecondary program. The following activities can help students make a decision about disclosure and will help them to build awareness of their disability and supports they might need

* Invite guest speakers from disability services or students who have disclosed their disability
* Visit a Disability Services center at a local college or tour alternative testing centers at postsecondary programs
* Read and examine procedures for disclosure
* Role-play speaking to a professor about accommodations.
* and review needed document requirements

**Postsecondary Accommodations**: Students will benefit from speaking to a representative from a school’s disability services office about common postsecondary accommodations, which might include—

* priority class registration
* reduced course load
* class accommodations such as note takers, recording devices, or sign language interpreters
* testing accommodations such as extended time or alternate location
* and assistive technology, like screen-reading or voice recognition

Let’s hear from a staff member at a Disability Services center discuss the services they can offer to students.

[Text on video reads: What is the mission of Student Access Services?]

[Video of Tiffany Culver, Student Access Services, begins playing.]

“The mission of Student Access Services at Vanderbilt is pretty much to make sure all students, regardless of their medical condition or disability, has equal access to all of Vanderbilt’s programs.”

[Text on video reads: What are the differences between accommodations in high school versus college?]

“The difference between high school and college is pretty much you can get the same accommodations but the environment is different. The extended time testing pretty much works the same, the distraction-free environment works the same. However, whereas in high school for the student, you have the professor and that parent that will probably take care of all the arrangements, for college it is up to the student to really take everything- it’s their responsibility to coordinate their accommodations once they are approved.”

[Text on video reads: How do students gain access to services?]

“Basically, we need something from the student requesting accommodations. Then, we need something from their medical provider outlining their medical condition, the limitations, and explains how it impacts their learning environment.”

[Text on video reads: What are the next steps for students?]

“Once students are registered with our office, which would be the first step in getting accommodations, they meet with our office staff, they confirm their accommodation plan, which is their approved accommodations, um their class schedule, which professors they would like to receive notification of their accommodations. We then send what we call a faculty notification letter to their faculty people. On top of that, students are also told they need to discuss their accommodation plan with their professors.”

[Text on video reads: How can students discuss their accommodations with their professors?]

“For students that want to disclose their accommodations or to discuss their accommodation plan or medical condition with their professors, they should not just give their letter to their professor or speak with them at the beginning or the end of the class. The best thing to do is to schedule some one-on-one time with the professor, even if it’s during their office hours, they need to schedule some time to actually sit down and discuss their plan and their situation with their professors.”

[Text on video reads: What is the role of the parent or guardian?]

“Students can actually say that they want their parents to participate. They can sit in on the meeting, they can include them through email or phone calls. However, we still prefer to communicate with the student directly. It is up to the student to actually participate with our office to get accommodations.”

[Text on video reads: What advice do you have for students thinking about disclosing their disability?]

“If their working with professors and they are already registered with Student Access Services, we say it is one of the most successful strategies is to communicate as much as possible. Be as transparent as possible. However, that does not mean that they have to disclose their medical condition. We just want students to be aware that they need to communicate with their professors.”

**Leadership Opportunities**: When completing self-advocacy activities, it is important to provide students with multiple opportunities to take on leadership roles. This will help them to build confidence with problem-solving, communication, and collaboration. Coordinate with their special education teacher and have the students present a proposal of ways they can increase their self-advocacy opportunities in school. Create opportunities for students to manage their services and supports.

For example, students may decide that they will email their general education teachers when a test is coming up to arrange the accommodations they need, rather than the special education teacher doing it. Schedule some time to regularly meet with the student so that they can self-reflect on what leadership skills they have demonstrated and if they are in need of any coaching or support.

**Conclusion**: We hope you enjoyed this activity on disability disclosure in higher education. Discover additional activities and supplemental materials found in our self-advocacy course.