

College Students with Disabilities & Federal Financial Aid

Students with disabilities of all sorts are eligible to apply for financial aid (www.fafsa.gov). As a college student, you may plan to take fewer hours each semester and not have full-time enrollment status. This can impact the amount of your financial aid package. That's why it is very important to meet with a financial aid counselor as soon as you have been admitted into your college and request a "reasonable accommodation" to maximize your financial aid funding. The time to schedule a meeting with a financial aid counselor is **not** the weeks immediately preceding or during a new semester – they are just too busy then!

From the US Department of Education: The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 require postsecondary institutions to provide reasonable accommodations for a student's disability, so long as they don't constitute undue hardship. Reasonable accommodations must be related to the student's disability, and can include extended time for testing and reduced course load, in addition to the usual architectural modifications. *Schools can and should use professional judgment to include in cost of attendance (or make other adjustments to income and assets) expenses related to the student's disability.* However, this does **not** permit the school to count the reduced course load as though it were a full-time load for financial aid purposes.

Current regulations determine enrollment status by program and require all students in a program to be subjected to the same definition of full-time status. **No exception is allowed for students with disabilities.** The Department of Education considered relaxing this standard but determined such a change would cause students with disabilities to run out of aid more quickly (due to semester fees, housing, etc.)

Financial Aid comes in three forms:

1. Grants and Scholarships do not need to be repaid and are granted on financial need, academic merit or other factors such as school zone or professional affiliation. A Pell Grant is our nation's most common federal aid grant to college students.
2. Work-study enables college students to take jobs on campus in exchange for tuition, room and board expenses.
3. Student loans must always be repaid often over a 10, 15 or 30 year period with interest. If a student borrower has a documented disability at the time of the initial loan application, they are held equally responsible for paying back all loans in a timely fashion. If a person acquires a total and permanent disability (TPD) after a school loan has been processed, the Department of Education will dismiss the loan after appropriate documentation (known as a TPD Discharge)

Persons working in certain public service fields are also eligible, under certain circumstances, to have their loans forgiven. This is known as the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program

In addition to your salary being garnished, your Social Security and disability benefits can be cut for failure to pay back a federal college loan.

Filing Your FAFSA

FAFSA = Free Application for Federal Student Aid and is available at fafsa.ed.gov or OkCollegeStart.org
Applications must be filled out online

In addition to federal funds, the FAFSA is often required by states and independent scholarship programs to determine eligibility. Regardless of whether you have settled on a college or degree program, **it is important you complete your FAFSA as soon after January 1!** You do not have to disclose any specific information about a disability on this form.

Students of all ages, nationalities and abilities are eligible to apply for financial aid.

To complete your FAFSA, you will need to have:

- Your social security number and driver's license (if any)
- Any w-2 forms showing money you or your parents earned
- Your most recent federal income tax return (or your parents' if you are still their dependent)
- Records of any untaxed income such as disability benefits payments
- Your (or parents') current bank statement
- Information on your housing costs and investments
- Alien registration or permanent resident card if you are not a US citizen.

3 things to know about federal student loans:

- You are not obligated to accept the entire amount of the loan package offered. **Be smart and accept only the money you will need.** If at all possible, pay off small amounts each month toward your student loan while still in college because that compounding interest adds up!
- **Subsidized** loans are awarded on the basis of financial need and they do not accrue interest while you are still in college. **Unsubsidized** loans immediately begin charging interest and so these types of loans are more expensive for students. One way to minimize how much interest accrues is to pay the interest as it accumulates (like paying that amount off each month while still in college!)
- Taking out federal student loans does not affect your SSDI payments. Only earned wages and incomes – not financial assistance programs – impact SSDI.

GOOD NEWS!

Upon your death, your federal student loan debt will be discharged. Your estate will not owe any money on your loan.

