Final Report: Postsecondary Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Washington State (2025)

Roots of Inclusion, in partnership with CoDesign Works, conducted a comprehensive survey to understand how K-12 education in Washington can better prepare students with disabilities for post-secondary success.

Improving Inclusive Practices

Recommendations for K-12 education supported by OSPI's Inclusionary Practices Network

Examining Educational Transitions

Key findings on accommodations, challenges, and desired supports

Understanding Student Experiences

Comprehensive survey of students with disabilities' postsecondary journeys

This report summarizes our findings and provides actionable insights to help educators better prepare students with disabilities for successful transitions to college and beyond.

What Students Found Most Surprising

Roots of Inclusion (**rootsofinclusion.org**), in partnership with CoDesign Works (**codesignworks.com**), and with support from the OSPI Inclusionary Practices Technical Assistance Network, conducted a survey in Winter-Spring 2025 to examine how K-12 schools in Washington State can better prepare students with disabilities for postsecondary success. Specifically, CoDesign Works surveyed students who had made the transition to higher education in Washington to ask for their reflections and insights. (While the survey was open to students enrolled in vocational programs, only students in 2 or 4-year college or university programs seemed to participate.) This report synthesizes key findings, challenges, and actionable recommendations, supported by the 219 students' responses and current research. The survey revealed several unexpected challenges that students encountered in their transition from high school to postsecondary education:

The Lack of Support Compared to High School

Many students were surprised that accommodations and support services in college were not as proactive as they were in high school. Student Quote: "In high school, my teachers made sure I got the support I needed. In college, I had to figure everything out on my own."

The Complexity of Requesting Accommodations

Students assumed that their high school accommodations would automatically transfer to college, only to find that they had to go through a formal process. Student Quote: "I thought my IEP would just follow me to college. No one told me I had to reapply for accommodations."

The Academic Workload

Many students were not prepared for the increased rigor of college coursework. Student Quote: "The amount of reading and homework was shocking. I had to learn how to manage my time fast."

Limited Awareness of Assistive Technology

Some students discovered assistive technology tools in college that they wished they had been introduced to earlier. Student Quote: "I never knew about speech-to-text software until college. It would have been so helpful in high school."

The Importance of Self-Advocacy

Students found that they had to advocate for themselves more than they ever had in high school. Student Quote: "I had to learn how to explain my disability and ask for help. In high school, my teachers did that for me."

These findings reinforce the need for stronger high school preparation programs that equip students with the skills, tools, and confidence they need to succeed in postsecondary education.

Summary of Interesting Findings

The survey uncovered several compelling insights about the experiences of students with disabilities transitioning to postsecondary education. Some key takeaways include:

The Importance of Self-Advocacy

Many students felt unprepared to advocate for their accommodations and support needs. They emphasized that learning how to navigate disability services and communicate their needs earlier would have made a significant difference. Student Quote: "I didn't even know I had to request accommodations myself in college. I thought they would automatically transfer like in high school."

Challenges in Time Management

A large portion of students struggled with managing their time effectively in college. High school did not prepare them for the level of independence and self-discipline required. Student Quote: "In high school, my teachers reminded me about assignments. In college, I had to figure it all out on my own, and I really struggled."

Disparities in Transition Planning

Students reported that their high school transition plans often lacked meaningful preparation for college, focusing more on compliance than practical readiness. Student Quote: "My transition plan just went over basic information. No one actually helped me practice advocating for myself or understanding what support was available."

Need for Exposure to Assistive Technology

Many students only learned about useful assistive technology after starting college, making their transition harder than necessary. Student Quote: "I never used text-to-speech software in high school, but in college, it became essential. Why didn't anyone introduce it to me sooner?"

These findings reinforce the need for stronger high school preparation programs that equip students with the skills, tools, and confidence they need to succeed in postsecondary education.

Differences by Age, Race, Disability Type, and Gender

Age Differences

- Younger students (18-22) were more likely to struggle with time management and independent learning
- Older students (23+) cited access barriers and financial challenges as major difficulties

Student Quote: "College was a shock after high school. Suddenly, no one was checking in on me, and I had to manage everything myself."

Student Quote: "As an older student, I had to juggle work, family, and school, and I didn't know where to turn for disability support."

Race Differences

- White students were the most likely to report receiving formal accommodations in college
- Black and Latino students were less likely to report receiving accommodations, despite identifying similar disabilities
- Multi-racial and Indigenous students reported more challenges navigating postsecondary disability services

Student Quote: "I didn't even know I had the right to ask for accommodations in college. I assumed I had to just figure it out on my own."

Disability Type Differences

- Students with learning disabilities were the largest group to receive testing accommodations but were also the most likely to report struggling with self-advocacy
- Students with psychological or mental health disabilities reported long wait times for disability services
- Students with physical disabilities faced physical accessibility challenges

Student Quote: "I qualified for extended test time, but I didn't know I had to ask for it in college. No one explained the process to me."

Gender Differences

- Male/Man students were less likely to seek out disability support services, even when they reported challenges
- Female/Woman students were more proactive in requesting accommodations
- Non-binary students were more likely to report feeling isolated due to a lack of inclusive disability and LGBTQ+ spaces

Student Quote: "I avoided going to disability services at first because I didn't want to be seen as 'needing help.' But I ended up falling behind because of it."

Student Demographics

> Survey respondents were predominantly white (76%), aged 18-22 (71%), and identified as male/man (60%). The study included diverse participants across age groups, racial backgrounds, and gender identities.

The survey collected responses from students across various age groups, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and gender identities. Below is a summary of the demographics of respondents:

71%

18-22 Years

131 respondents

17%

23-27 Years

31 respondents

10%

28-35 Years

18 respondents

2%

36+ Years

4 respondents

Gender Identity

60%

Male/Man

130 respondents

32%

Woman/Female

70 respondents

5%

Non-binary

10 respondents

3%

Prefer not to disclose

8 respondents

Racial & Ethnic Identity

76%

White

172 respondents

7%

Black or African American

15 respondents

17%

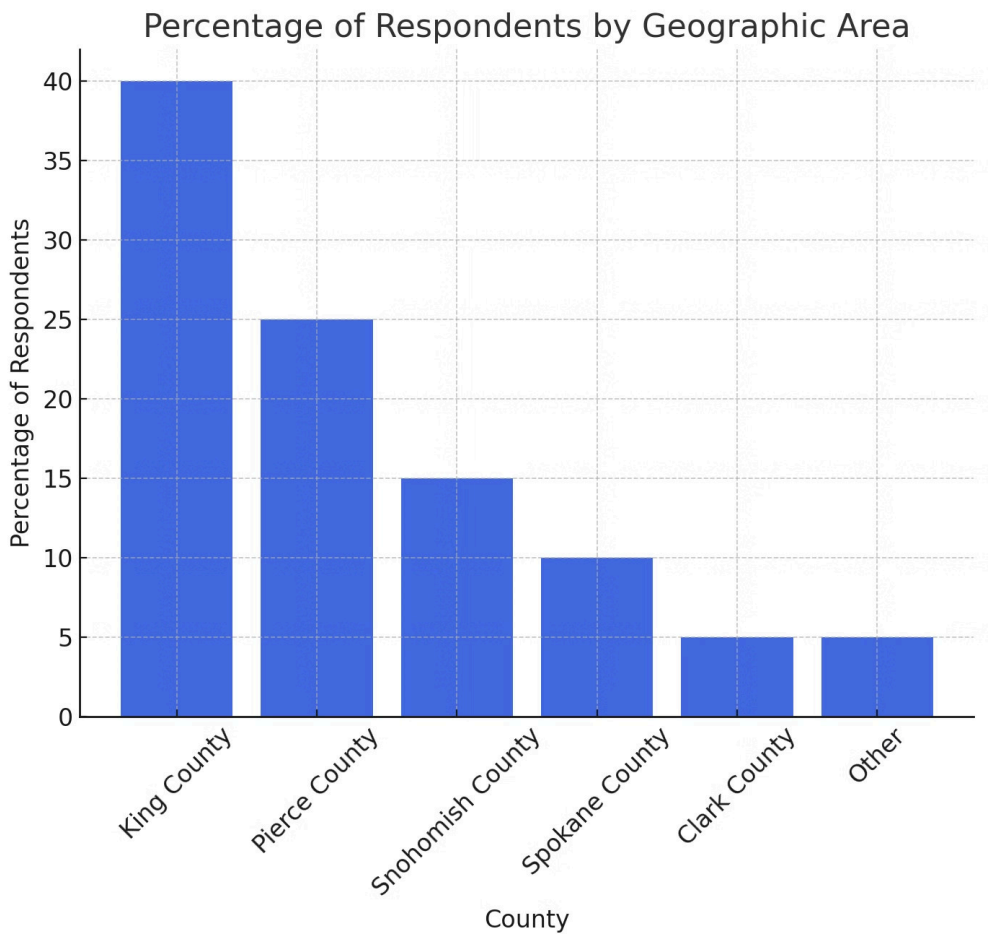
Multi-Racial & Other Groups

28 respondents

The Multi-Racial & Other Groups category includes:

- Multi-Racial: 12
- Native or Indigenous: 8
- Middle Eastern or North African: 3
- Latino/Hispanic: 2
- Asian: 2
- Pacific Islander: 1

Geographic Distribution of Respondents



County Distribution

The survey captured geographic distribution of respondents across Washington State. The majority of participants came from the most populated counties:

County	Percentage of Respondents
King County	40%
Pierce County	25%
Snohomish County	15%
Spokane County	10%
Clark County	5%
Other	5%

This distribution generally reflects the population density of Washington State, with most respondents coming from the Puget Sound region.

Disability Types Reported by Students

History of Supports in K-12: Sixty percent of respondents received special education and had an IEP in high school, while 25% had a 504 Plan. Fifteen percent did not have either in high school but identified as students with disabilities.

The survey collected information on the types of disabilities identified by respondents. A total of 371 responses were recorded from students who identified with one or more disabilities. Below is a summary:

Disability Type	Number of Respondents
Physical disability	25
Sensory disability	18
Intellectual or learning disability	45
Developmental disability	30
Communication disability	12
Psychological or mental health disability	50
Chronic illness	22
Prefer not to disclose	10
Other	8

Common Disability Combinations

Many students identified as having more than one disability. The most common disability combinations reported included:

Intellectual or learning disability + Psychological disability

35 Respondents

Psychological disability + Communication disability

15 Respondents

Developmental disability + Intellectual or learning disability

28 Respondents

Psychological disability + Chronic illness

22 Respondents

Sensory disability + Physical disability

18 Respondents

These combinations highlight the complex nature of disabilities and the need for comprehensive support systems that address multiple needs simultaneously.

Accommodations Received in Postsecondary Education

Survey respondents reported receiving a range of accommodations in their current educational institutions. The most frequently cited accommodations included:

102

Testing-Related Accommodations

Extended time on exams, distraction-free testing environments, and alternative formats for assessments

85

Assistive Technology

Screen readers, speech-to-text software, and adaptive keyboards

76

Alternative Instructional Methods

Flexibility in teaching styles, access to recorded lectures, and alternative ways to demonstrate knowledge

64

Access to Materials in Alternative Formats

Digital textbooks, audiobooks, and other accessible learning materials

Student Quote: "I was grateful for assistive technology and extra test time, but I wish I had learned how to advocate for them in high school."

Challenges in Transitioning from High School to College

Students faced several difficulties in their transition from high school to postsecondary education. Common themes included:

Time Management

Many students struggled with balancing coursework, extracurricular activities, and personal responsibilities. The increased independence required in college was a significant adjustment.

Student Quote: "Professors expect you to know how to manage your time, but no one ever taught me how. I felt overwhelmed trying to keep up."

Academic Rigor

The increased demands of college coursework were a surprise to some students, as they found it difficult to keep up with the fast pace and higher expectations.

Lack of Self-Advocacy Skills

Students felt unprepared to advocate for their accommodations and support needs. Some had difficulty navigating disability services and understanding their rights.

Student Quote: "I wish someone had helped me practice self-advocacy before college. I didn't know how to request accommodations or even who to talk to."

Access Barriers

Some students encountered challenges accessing disability support services, including long wait times, unclear policies, and a lack of proactive communication from institutions.

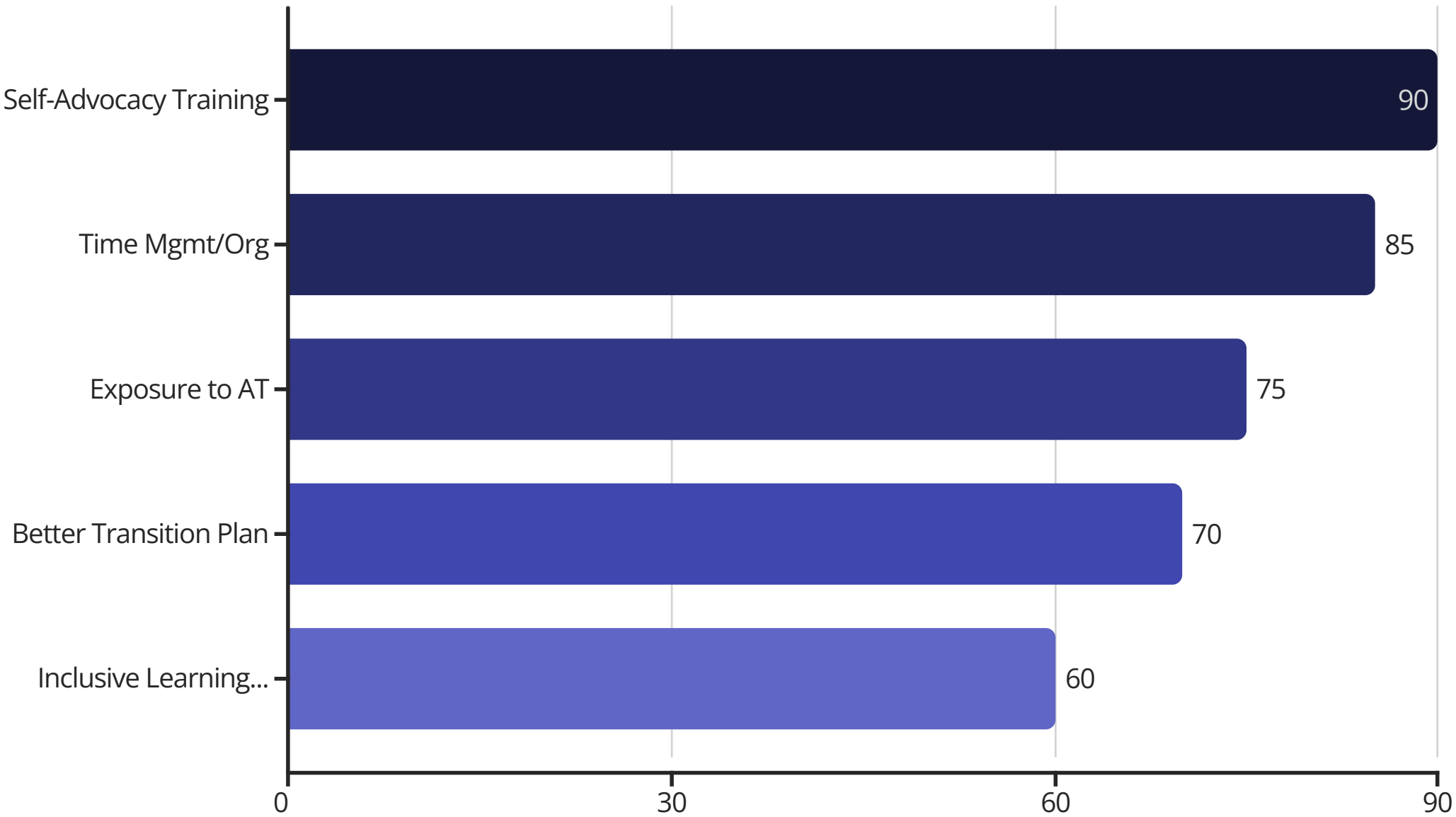
Social and Emotional Challenges

Many students experienced isolation or difficulty forming connections due to a lack of inclusive spaces or peer support networks.

Student Quote: "It was hard to find a community of students like me. I often felt alone navigating both academics and disability support."

Supports Students Wish They Had in High School

Respondents identified several areas where high schools could have better prepared them, including:



> Student Quote: "I wish someone had taught me how to manage my schedule and ask for help before I got to college. It was a steep learning curve."

> Student Quote: "In high school, I never had to advocate for myself because my teachers handled accommodations for me. In college, I had no idea where to start."

Detailed Look at Desired Supports

Training in Self-Advocacy

Many students wished they had been taught how to effectively advocate for their needs, communicate with instructors, and navigate disability support services in college.

> Student Quote: "I had no idea how to advocate for myself in college. If I had learned how to talk to professors and request accommodations earlier, I would have been more confident."

Greater Exposure to Assistive Technology

Some students were unaware of the technology available to support their learning, such as screen readers, note-taking apps, and speech-to-text software.

> Student Quote: "I didn't even know assistive technology existed until I got to college. If I had learned about it earlier, I would have had an easier time with my classes."

Instruction in Time Management and Organization

Managing coursework, deadlines, and independent study was a major challenge for students who had not been taught these skills in high school.

> Student Quote: "College professors expect you to already know how to stay organized and manage deadlines. I struggled a lot because I never had to do that in high school."

Better Transition Planning in IEP and 504 Plans

Some students felt that their transition planning was inadequate, and they were not fully prepared for the differences between high school and college accommodations.

> Student Quote: "My transition plan didn't really prepare me for what college would actually be like. I wish I had practiced self-advocacy and independence before graduating."

"I had no idea which services I could access after high school. If someone had connected me with adult agencies earlier, I wouldn’t have felt so lost."

Students benefit when IEP teams facilitate early connections with agencies such as:

- **Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR)** for employment-related services.
- **Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA)** for long-term supports.
- **Colleges and universities, including community colleges and vocational schools,** to learn about disability services offerings.
- **Assistive technology providers, such as those groups listed at the DSHS website: https://www.dshs.wa.gov/dvr/assistive-technology**

What the Research Says

Recent studies have highlighted key factors influencing the postsecondary success of students with disabilities. Research underscores the importance of self-advocacy, access to assistive technology, executive functioning skills, and effective transition planning as crucial determinants in easing the transition from high school to college.

Self-Advocacy and Transition Planning

Studies indicate that students with disabilities often struggle with self-advocacy in postsecondary settings due to inadequate preparation in high school. A study from the Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability (Dong et al., 2024) found that students who had explicit self-advocacy training in high school reported significantly higher confidence in requesting accommodations and navigating disability services in college.

Assistive Technology Use

Research from the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health suggests that early exposure to assistive technology, such as text-to-speech and speech-to-text software, improves educational outcomes for students with disabilities by increasing accessibility and independence.

Institutional Barriers and Faculty Support

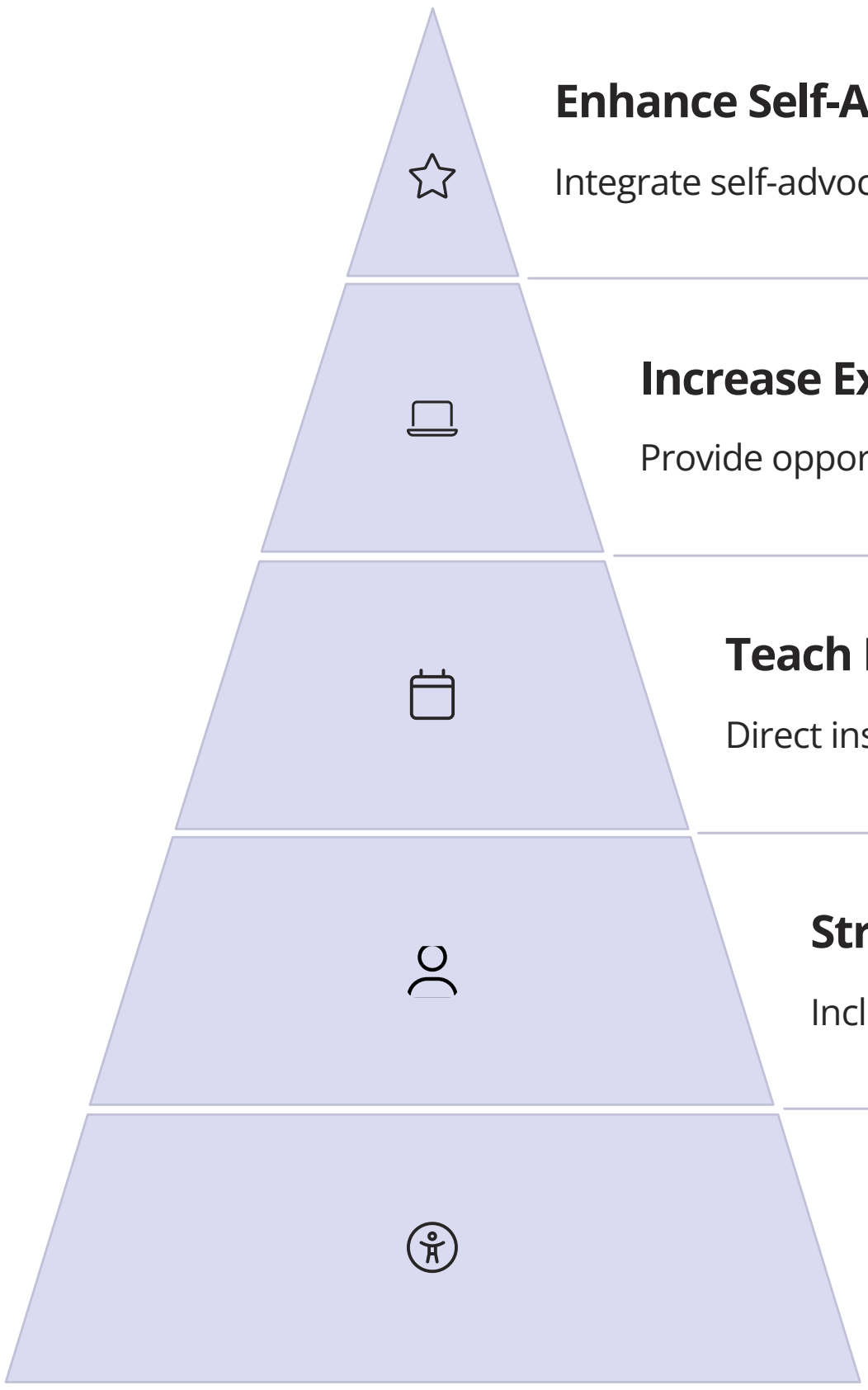
Findings from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report (2024) highlight ongoing challenges with faculty reluctance to implement accommodations and institutional policies that make accessing support difficult. The GAO recommends increased faculty training and institutional reforms to streamline the accommodation process.

Peer Support and Inclusive Environments

Studies emphasize the need for inclusive peer support networks. Research by Lipka et al. (2020) found that students with disabilities who engaged in disability-related student organizations and peer mentoring programs reported higher social integration and retention rates in college.

Recommendations for K-12 Schools

Based on these findings, we recommend that K-12 institutions take the following actions to improve post-secondary readiness for students with disabilities:



Enhance Self-Advocacy Training

Integrate self-advocacy skills into curriculum

Increase Exposure to Assistive Technology

Provide opportunities to learn and practice using tools

Teach Executive Functioning Skills

Direct instruction on time management and organization

Strengthen Transition Planning

Include explicit planning for postsecondary success

Improve Accessibility and Inclusion

Create environments that mirror postsecondary settings

These recommendations are based directly on student feedback and research findings, addressing the most significant gaps in current transition practices.

Enhancing Self-Advocacy Training

Schools should integrate self-advocacy skills into their curriculum, ensuring students understand their rights under disability laws and are equipped to request accommodations effectively. This should include role-playing exercises, peer mentoring, and direct instruction on navigating postsecondary disability services.

Understand Your Disability

Students should be able to explain their disability, how it affects their learning, and what accommodations help them succeed.

Know Your Rights

Students should understand disability laws like the ADA and Section 504, and how these laws apply in educational settings.

Practice Communication

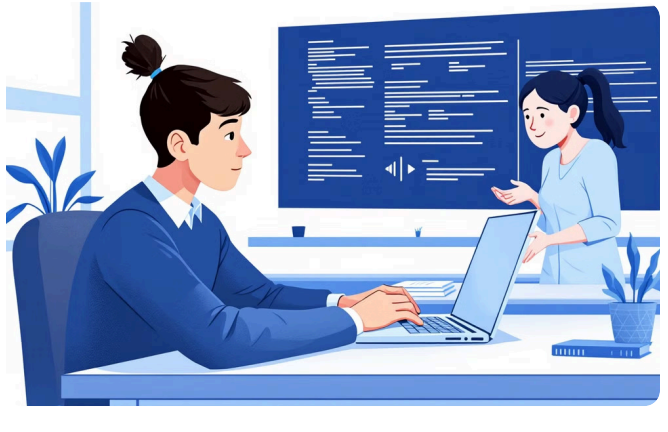
Students should practice explaining their needs to teachers, administrators, and peers through role-playing and real-world scenarios.

Navigate Support Systems

Students should learn how to identify and access support services at colleges and universities.

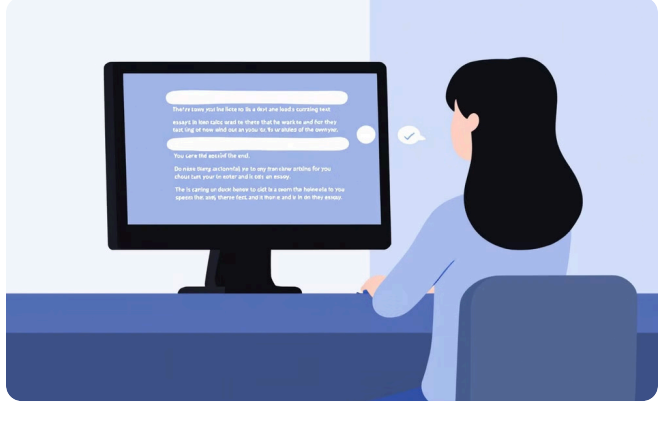
> Student Quote: "I had no idea how to advocate for myself in college. If I had learned how to talk to professors and request accommodations earlier, I would have been more confident."

Increasing Exposure to Assistive Technology



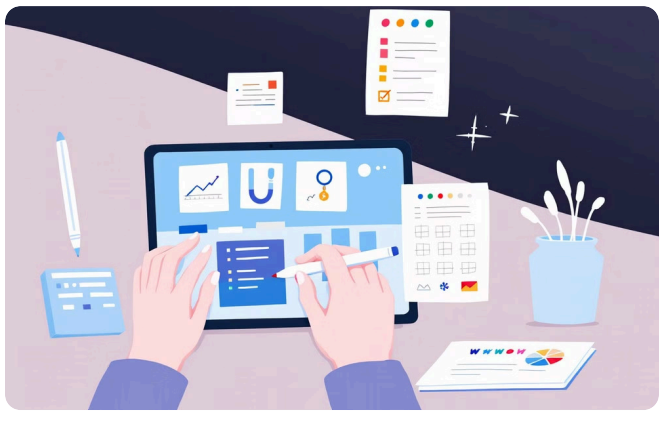
Text-to-Speech Software

Programs that convert digital text into spoken words, helping students with reading difficulties or visual impairments access written content.



Speech-to-Text Tools

Applications that convert spoken words into digital text, assisting students with writing difficulties or physical disabilities.



Note-Taking Applications

Digital tools that help students organize information, record lectures, and structure their thoughts in accessible formats.

High schools should provide students with opportunities to learn and practice using assistive technology tools that they may encounter in college. Schools should also ensure that teachers are trained in these technologies so they can support students effectively.

> Student Quote: "I struggled in my first year of college because I wasn't familiar with the tech that could have helped me. High school never introduced me to these tools."

Teaching Executive Functioning Skills

Schools should offer direct instruction on time management, organization, and study strategies to prepare students for the independent demands of college. Teaching students how to use planners, break down assignments into manageable steps, and create effective study habits can make a significant difference in their post-secondary success.

Key Executive Functioning Skills to Teach:

- Time management and prioritization
- Task initiation and completion
- Organization of materials and information
- Planning and goal setting
- Self-monitoring and reflection
- Seeking psychological support and reducing stress

> Student Quote: "College was overwhelming because I never learned how to manage my time. I wish I had been given more responsibility in high school to practice these skills."

Strengthening Transition Planning

IEP and 504 Plan transition services should include explicit planning for postsecondary success, including partnerships with colleges and universities to ease the transition. Schools should host information sessions where students can meet disability service coordinators from local colleges and understand the differences between K-12 and postsecondary accommodations.

1 Freshman and Sophomore Years

Begin discussing postsecondary goals and exploring college disability services

2 Sophomore and Junior Years

Visit college campuses and meet with disability service offices. Begin to practice self-advocacy skills and learn accommodation request processes.

3 Spring of Junior Year/Fall of Senior Year

Gather documentation needed for college accommodations. Connect with disability peer groups on campuses, if possible.

4 Spring of Senior Year

Continue practicing self-advocacy skills and learning about accommodation request processes

5 Summer Before College

Connect with college disability services and set up accommodations

> Student Quote: "My transition plan just checked boxes. I wish someone had actually walked me through what to expect and how to prepare."

Improving Accessibility and Inclusion

Schools should create environments where students with disabilities can practice self-advocacy and experience inclusive education that mirrors postsecondary settings. This includes universal design for learning (UDL) principles, flexible learning formats, and better collaboration between special education and general education teachers.

Universal Design for Learning

Implement UDL principles that provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression to accommodate diverse learning needs.

Inclusive Classroom Practices

Train all teachers in inclusive practices that benefit students with and without disabilities, creating a more accepting and supportive learning environment.

Collaborative Teaching Models

Foster collaboration between special education and general education teachers to ensure consistent support and accommodations across all classes.

Student-Led IEP Meetings

Encourage students to lead their own IEP meetings, practicing self-advocacy in a supportive environment before college.

> Student Quote: "I never felt like I belonged in high school, and that made it harder to adjust to college. Schools need to do more to make students with disabilities feel included and valued."

Conclusion

This survey underscores the need for more robust support systems in K-12 education to help students with disabilities navigate the transition to college successfully. By implementing the recommendations above, Washington schools can foster greater inclusion, equity, and preparedness for students with disabilities, ultimately improving their educational and career outcomes.

By addressing these key areas, schools can better prepare students with disabilities for the challenges and opportunities of postsecondary education, helping them achieve their full potential and contribute their unique perspectives and talents to society.

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