

What High School Students With Learning Disabilities Need to Know About College Foreign Language Requirements

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As the director of a university support program for students with learning disabilities, I often receive calls from parents, teachers, and students regarding transition to postsecondary education. Most questions relate to general program services, but many people ask about requirements for foreign language study—in particular, admissions eligibility for students who took less than 2 years of a foreign language in high school because of a learning disability. This is a reasonable concern; college freshmen with learning disabilities are less likely to have completed 2 years of secondary foreign language study (57%) than their peers without disabilities (86%; Henderson, 1999). In fact, students with learning disabilities are less likely to have completed 2 years of secondary foreign language study than students reporting any other type of disability (70%; Henderson).

A less pressing short-term issue—but perhaps a more important one—relates to institutional requirements *after* the student has matriculated. Here are some questions people ask.

- Does the institution require foreign language study for graduation?
- If so, how many semesters of study are required?
- Does the length of study required vary across majors, programs of study, or—



in the case of universities—across colleges? How is the issue of learning disabilities considered in relation to these requirements?

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How is the issue of learning disabilities considered in relation to these postsecondary foreign language requirements?

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Given the great variation in college admissions and graduation requirements, there is understandable confusion related to this issue on the part of secondary personnel, families, and students in transition (see box, "Why Is This Issue So Confusing?").

This article provides information to secondary school personnel on several issues related to postsecondary foreign language study and students with learning disabilities. The article also provides perspectives on transition and specific suggestions for assisting students with learning disabilities and their families.

How Can Foreign Language Courses Affect College Admission?

Perhaps the most common reason for waiving foreign language courses at the secondary level is the potential negative effect of these courses on the student's grade point average (GPA) and the long-term implication for the college admission viability. Other valid and justifiable concerns include the possibility that the energy required to take foreign language courses may "drag down" grades in other courses, and that subsequently a difficult emotional experience might be created for the student.

Let's look at the issue through a different lens. Many postsecondary institutions require a set number of foreign language units in high school for the student to be considered admissible. Although some institutions are flexible regarding this requirement (and may consider the influence of the learning disabilities), other institutions will

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(Back Row, left to right): Jeanne Glover (10 years), Sabata Morris (10 years), Brenda Tillman (35 years), Bernadette Knoblauch (10 years).

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Why Is This Issue So Confusing?

Variation in Requirements. Admissions requirements vary widely across postsecondary institutions, depending on such factors as mission and academic competitiveness. Some institutions do not require secondary foreign language courses at the high school level, whereas others might require two, and others still might require three courses. In addition, some institutions may not require a set number of units, but instead “recommend” high school foreign language study. When making programming decisions at the secondary level, educators should consider the requirements of several institutions where a student might be interested in applying. Although college may seem distant to an eighth or ninth grader, decisions made at these levels will have a long-lasting effect.

Variation in Services. The types of services available for students with learning disabilities vary greatly across institutions. Some institutions may have formal learning disabilities programs with established policies and procedures for accommodations and course substitutions, while other institutions offer accommodations only, and may do so in an ad hoc manner. A study of 2- and 4-year postsecondary institutions by the National Center for Education Statistics (Lewis & Farris, 1999) revealed that 42% of all institutions reported providing course substitutions. Interestingly, larger institutions (10,000 or more students) were more likely to offer course substitutions (81%) than smaller institutions (less than 3,000 students; 29%). Likewise, public institutions were more likely to offer course substitutions (69%) than were private institutions (35%). In planning ahead, it may be wise to be prepared for a rigorous course substitution procedure. It is better for a student to have supporting documents in hand, than to be required to go back to the archives for records that are several years old.

Variation in Mandates. The legal mandates that ensure services for students with learning disabilities at the secondary level are different from the mandates at the postsecondary level. Whereas students at the secondary level may be protected by the coverage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), this coverage ends upon graduation. Likewise, despite the fact that Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 applies to both secondary and postsecondary institutions, each is subject to different provisions within the legislation. Thus, students who are on Section 504 plans at the secondary level will find that the provided services end upon graduation; and the student must seemingly begin anew at the postsecondary level.

Variation in Policies. Policies for students with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level are dynamic and evolving. Criteria for learning disabilities documentation and subsequent decisions about accommodations, such as course substitutions, are becoming more rigorous on the basis of recent court and Office for Civil Rights (OCR) decisions related to required services and accommodations for students with disabilities.

adhere rigidly to this requirement and will not consider the learning disabilities in the admissions process. Secondary school personnel need to understand, and to help parents understand, that both Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) allow postsecondary institutions to set the parameters for determining if an applicant is qualified for admission. Thus, a decision to waive foreign lan-

guage courses at the secondary level based on the intent of keeping the student's GPA competitive may in fact restrict the options of colleges to which the student may be accepted. For these reasons, secondary school personnel must share this information with students and their families as early as possible to assist in the transition process. (See box, “Questions to Ask College Admissions Offices” for what questions

students and their families should ask the admissions office of a college or university.)

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Is Foreign Language a Graduation Requirement of a College?

In the college search process, students should examine the foreign language *admissions* requirements at an institution of choice, as well as the foreign language requirements for *graduation* from the institution. According to a 1999 survey by the Modern Language Association (Brod & Welles, 1999), foreign language study is offered by 87% of all postsecondary institutions, including 63% of 4-year institutions. Some of these institutions require satisfactory foreign language course completion as a graduation requirement. Other institutions have specific programs or schools that require varying credit amounts in foreign language.

For example, students within some colleges of a university may be required to take two semesters of foreign lan-

Questions to Ask College Admissions Offices

- Is high school foreign language study required for admission? If so, how many years, or units, are required?
- If a set number of secondary foreign language units are required for admission, can this requirement be waived or accommodated for students who took fewer units because of a learning disability?
- If secondary foreign language study is not required, is it recommended or “preferred” for admission?

In the college search process, students should examine the foreign language admissions requirements at an institution of choice, as well as the foreign language requirements for graduation.

guage, while students in other colleges of the same university are required to take four semesters. Still other institutions do not require a set number of semesters of foreign language study, but rather require a student to successfully complete a level of proficiency (e.g., intermediate language). High school students and their families should seek out these facts during the information-gathering stage of the transition process.

Interestingly, some institutions consider the foreign language graduation requirements completed if the student completed a given number of foreign language units from high school (e.g., 3 years of a single foreign language). Though difficult, foreign language courses at the secondary level are likely to be less challenging than postsecondary-level foreign language courses. Carefully selected accommodations, learning strategies, and teaching strategies may be critical in helping the student achieve success at the secondary level.

High school students and their families should seek out information regarding foreign language requirements during the information-gathering stage of the transition process.

In addition, it may be worthwhile to consider if a given postsecondary institution will accept foreign language courses taken on a pass/fail option, or if other courses, such as American Sign Language would be accepted. Still other

institutions offer students the option to “test out” of the requirement via a placement test. Exposure to the language at the secondary level will likely improve the chance of success on this test.

Because foreign language requirements vary across and within institutions, prospective students should be certain to research this information carefully. Educators need to design secondary programming in light of this information to enhance students’ chances for success at the postsecondary level. (See box, “Questions to Ask an Academic Dean’s Office or an Academic Advisor” for questions related to graduation requirements and foreign language study that students and their families should ask during the college-search process.)

Questions to Ask an Academic Dean’s Office or an Academic Advisor

- Is foreign language study required as a “general education” requirement for graduation?
- Is foreign language study required in all programs or majors, or just in selected programs or majors?
- If foreign language study is required for graduation, is there a set number of semesters required or a predetermined course level (e.g., introductory or intermediate) that must be completed?
- Does the amount of foreign language study required vary across majors or colleges (in the case of a university)?
- Can a student meet the graduation requirements with a predetermined number of foreign language units at the secondary level?
- Can the student take a placement test and “place out” of the foreign language requirement?
- Is foreign language study an essential requirement of the program of study being considered by the student?
- Does the institution have course substitution policies for students with learning disabilities?

How Do Colleges Determine Course Substitutions?

In addition to encountering varying foreign language requirements, students should also expect to find a range of approaches to determining if a course-substitution petition will be granted. On one end of the continuum are institutions that base the decision on the student’s high school educational plan. If a student was granted a course substitution at the secondary level, he or she is likely to receive a substitution at the postsecondary level. In the middle of the continuum are institutions that require specific documentation and, in some cases, additional documentation before making the decision. The fact that foreign language was substituted in high school (or at another postsecondary institution) may be considered, but might not be the determining factor in the student’s petition.

On the other end of the continuum are institutions that do not provide foreign language substitutions in any case. If the institution determines through a reasoned and deliberative process that a

Some institutions offer students the option to “test out” of the requirement via a placement test; other institutions have more rigid requirements

particular component of a plan of study (e.g., foreign language) is essential, that component need not be altered, waived, or substituted. Students and families should be aware that “despite the fact that Section 504 provides that course substitutions may be considered a reasonable accommodation, both OCR and the courts have supported the refusal of institutions to provide course substitutions as an accommodation” (Heyward, 1998, Chapter 6, p. 24; OCR stands for the Office for Civil Rights, the U.S. Department of Education agency that enforces Section 504 and the ADA). This was strikingly illustrated in the case of *Guckenberger et al. v. Boston University et al.* (1997), in which a group of stu-

dents with learning disabilities and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder brought action against Boston University for "instituting an across-the-board policy precluding course substitutions in foreign language and mathematics" (p. 1). One of the key findings in the case was that "a university can refuse to modify academic degree requirements—even course requirements that students with learning disabilities cannot satisfy—as long as it undertakes a diligent assessment of the available options" (p. 42).

Finally, *you should not assume that a postsecondary institution will provide a course substitution because one was provided at the secondary level, or even at another postsecondary institution.* Secondary school personnel and families need to understand this range of approaches to determining course substitutions and they need to know these options during the application stage. (See box, "Questions to Ask an Office for Students With Disabilities," for questions related to course-substitution procedures that students with learning disabilities and their families should ask during the college-search process.)

What Data Might Be Valuable in the Substitution Process?

Secondary school personnel can be of great assistance to students and families by ensuring that any decision to waive foreign language requirements is firmly grounded in comprehensive data that clearly delineates a substantial language-based learning disability. A standard aptitude/achievement battery with one or two discrepant subtest scores (e.g., on one measure of spelling) may be insufficient to verify the need for a course substitution at the postsecondary level. In contrast, a comprehensive evaluation that examines the student's phonological skills, processing skills, and memory skills will shed a great deal of light on these processes and will be instrumental in substantiating the need for a course substitution petition. Although secondary school personnel are hard pressed for time to complete additional testing, it is a reasonable argument that cases involving a fundamental modification of curriculum

Questions to Ask an Office for Students With Disabilities

1. If a course substitution process exists, is it a formal process (i.e., is it a written policy) or is it an informal process?
2. When should the process be initiated? Is there a semester deadline for initiating the request?
3. Does the student need to attempt a college level foreign language course with accommodations and tutoring assistance before a decision will be made, or can the student petition for a course substitution without enrolling in an foreign language course?
4. On what basis are course substitution decisions made?
5. Who makes the final decision related to approving a course substitution?
6. What supporting documents are needed to make course substitution decisions?
7. When should this documentation be submitted?
8. Does a waiver or substitution at the high school level or at another college make a substitution at this institution likely?
9. If a course substitution was provided at the high school level or at another college, what supporting documents would help in making the decision at this institution?
10. How long does the petition process typically take?
11. If a substitution is provided, how many additional courses must the student take?
12. If a substitution is provided, what specific courses will substitute?
13. Can substituted courses come from courses already taken at the institution (if the student is already enrolled)?
14. If one or more of the potential substitutable courses have been taken to fulfill another portion of a degree requirement, can the course(s) also apply toward the language requirement, or does the student need to take additional courses?
15. If a course substitution is provided, is this indicated on the student's transcript?
16. If the request is denied, what options are available to the student?

requirements are deserving of greater attention. In addition, families are relying on the knowledge and expertise of school personnel to ensure that such decisions are data based and firmly entrenched in current practice.

What Additional Documentation Might Be Valuable?

In cases where the student's learning disabilities substantially limit his or her

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ability to successfully complete a foreign language, or in cases when a student has attempted foreign language courses unsuccessfully, the special education team may decide to waive the foreign language requirement as part of the student's individualized education program (IEP).

If this is the case, I strongly recommended that the rationale for this decision be put in writing. *This should be more than a statement in the IEP or the IEP team minutes, but rather should be formal, on official letterhead, and should clearly and distinctly link the rationale for the decision to the data in the student's most current diagnostic testing.* The student should maintain the letter in a transition folder with other diagnostic information and IEPs.

This type of information may be pivotal in a future course-substitution petition. Because educators often make

decisions to waive foreign language requirements early in the student's high school career, teams need to carefully document such decisions before the memories of the team members fade, team members retire, or records are destroyed.

Final Thoughts

Although we have made tremendous progress in providing students with learning disabilities with effective transitions to postsecondary education, we still need to continue a dialogue related to the differences between secondary and postsecondary requirements. We must keep up with policy and practices at the postsecondary level, which continually change and evolve. Further, although regulations such as Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act apply to both secondary schools and postsecondary institutions, different sections within the laws apply to the two arenas. Thus, practice and policy

related to Section 504 in one setting may not apply to another setting.

Though much of the concern in the transition process centers on postsecondary admissions eligibility, everyone involved in the transition process must understand that admissions is just one piece of the transition puzzle. The larger and more important piece is for the student to be prepared to *remain* in the postsecondary institution of choice—and eventually to *graduate* from it. With careful planning, the postsecondary foreign language requirement need not be an impediment in this objective for students with learning disabilities.

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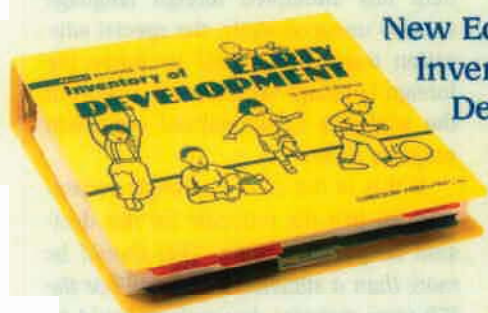
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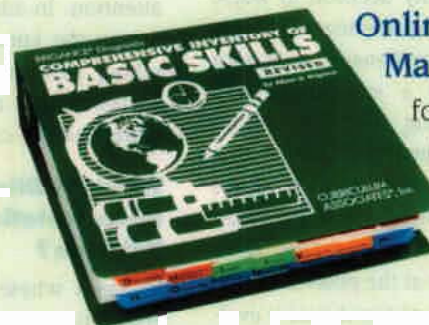
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