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In the United States today, if a student with a serious physical disability wants to go away to college and live on campus, only four colleges provide the necessary services for that student to do so. Before the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, there were twice as many choices.

College is a big part of the American dream and in 2003, my son, Tommy Tiedemann, began pursuing his dream of going away to college. Tommy has cerebral palsy, uses a power wheelchair, and needs assistance with the activities of daily living. He also had a 3.7 high school grade point average, but he found that his suburban Atlanta teachers and guidance counselors had no information on the most disability-friendly colleges for him.

To meet Tommy's requirements for living on campus, a college would have to have not only accessibility to its academic programs and its campus (both required by law), but also such things as personal care assistance, meal assistance, lift-equipped buses or vans, and wheelchair repair.

Tommy began doing research on his own that eventually evolved into the major project of his senior year and which I continued after he started college. The information below is not meant to be the last word in disability-friendly colleges, but we hope it provides a place to start looking at the range of still somewhat limited choices.

#### **YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT**

All colleges are required to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and some go well beyond its requirements. Tommy however, wanted to find those schools that actually provide assistance for those who need help with the personal activities of daily life as well as with the academic needs of students with disabilities. These types of assistance would include academic aides, meal aides, note takers, wheelchair repair, a disabilities services office, and dorm housing with 24-hour personal assistance. Doing his research in 2003, Tommy and his mentor developed this shorthand phrase: "Could Christopher Reeve attend your college as a resident student?" Put that way, college representatives and recruiters quickly got the point--but few could answer in the affirmative.

Those that could--University of California at Berkeley, Wright State University, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Edinboro University of Pennsylvania--each followed different philosophies of enablement. However, each one had the goal of combining an excellent education with the training and experience to live as independently as possible. Our profiles of these four most disability-friendly colleges are listed in rough order of the speed at which they move a student toward independent living.

#### **Full Service Colleges**

##### **\* University of California at Berkeley**

Berkeley ([www.berkeley.edu](http://www.berkeley.edu)) is famous as the place where Ed Roberts and the "Rolling Quads" revolutionized disability education in the 1960s. The Physically Disabled Students'

Program was established in 1970 with federal funding, and in 1975. The Residence Program was established. The Residence Program is designed for freshmen and transfer students who have never directed their own personal care. Over two semesters (one academic year), students learn the skills to coordinate their own medical and personal care needs. At the end of that first college semester, the students are expected to use their own staff instead of Berkeley's special assistants. Students take a reduced course load during the time they are learning to coordinate their care. The Berkeley Web site notes that The Residence Program has fully accessible rooms in the Berkeley residence halls, career counseling, scholarships, tutoring, on-campus van/tram service, and accessible public transportation. UC Berkeley has approximately 23,000 undergraduate students.

#### **Wright State University (Dayton, OH)**

Wright State ([www.wright.edu](http://www.wright.edu)) takes a somewhat different path to achieving independence and has also come up with a novel solution to living on a Snowbelt campus for students challenged with mobility issues. At Wright State, daytime attendant care is provided by WSU students who have received training. The procedure at night is to match the student who has a physical disability with a roommate who is not disabled and can assist in an emergency. There is also a daytime personal care station in the student union building on campus. Wright State representatives stressed that their philosophy is to provide "an avenue" for students with disabilities, but not to do everything for them.

The accessibility of the campus makes this easier. A relatively young school which opened in 1967, it was built to be accessible and is quite flat. A labyrinth of tunnels was built along with the school connecting all major campus buildings and one dorm. Students can travel around campus in the Ohio winter without coats and without getting wheelchairs stuck in snow.

The school of 17,000 undergraduates offers a summer orientation for students with disabilities and their parents, courses on disability management, a technology center, career and vocational support services, note takers, adapted athletics, tutoring, reading and writing assistance, and meal assistance.

(See article in EP's July 2008 issue entitled "Technology Opens New Doors" and authored by Patti Murphy, which relates the experience of Wright State University student Sara Pyszka.)

#### **University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**

The first comprehensive program of post-secondary education for people with severe physical disabilities, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) ([www.uiuc.edu](http://www.uiuc.edu)) is still ranked first in many surveys of the comprehensiveness of disability support programs.

Other "firsts" listed at the UIUC Web site include first university with accessible buses, first independent living center for those dependent upon respiratory devices and/or personal care services, first rehabilitation service fraternity, first formal study-abroad program for students with disabilities, and first collegiate wheelchair basketball teams for both men and women, with varsity letters awarded.

Prior to 1994, Beckwith Hall, home of the transitional disability management program, took a "provide everything" approach. Today staffers still confirm references, conduct background checks, and train personal care aides, but it is the students themselves who do the interviewing and hiring.

Other important UIUC services include career counseling, scholarships, tutoring, basic wheelchair maintenance, lift buses, driver assessment and training, private rooms with semi-private bathrooms, meal assistance, 24-hour emergency personal assistance, state-of-the-art

computer lab, emergency call system in all rooms, and housekeeping and maintenance services. Approximately 31,000 undergraduates attend UIUC.

#### **Edinboro University of Pennsylvania (Edinboro, PA)**

Edinboro University ([www.edinboro.edu](http://www.edinboro.edu)) may offer the widest range of services of any school in the United States for students with disabilities. A unit of the University of Pennsylvania, Edinboro began by offering services to students with visual impairments many years ago, and in the words of one staff member, "it just snowballed" into services for other disabilities.

The word "snowballed" is apt. Edinboro, about 20 miles from Lake Erie in western Pennsylvania, boasts one of the most challenging climates in America, receiving in the neighborhood of 85 inches of snow a year.

Edinboro offers life skills training complete with a model apartment but does not require students to hire their own personal care assistants. Instead, the university provides personal care services in the dormitories themselves. Students have private rooms with call buttons and aides on call 24-hours-a-day. A fleet of lift vans helps wheelchair users combat the snow and get to class on time and also takes people to destinations off campus. The student must schedule all of these services personally, however.

Other services include a wheelchair repair shop, the life skills center with an occupational therapist and rehab nurse, physical therapy facility, a recreation center, a computer lab with state-of-the-art adaptive technology, meal aides, homework aides, and varsity and intramural sports.

Of the approximately 7,700 students at Edinboro, between 400 and 500 have disabilities, according to the university.

#### **ADA-PLUS SERVICE**

As the profiles make clear, all the full-service colleges are state-run institutions. There are no longer any private or religiously-affiliated colleges in the United States that offer the full range of services to students with physical disabilities.

There are, however, a number of other public colleges that offer services beyond what they are required to provide under the ADA. Accessible transportation, dorm rooms that are wheelchair accessible, assistance with finding personal care aides, and, occasionally, dining hall assistance are listed by some colleges on their Web sites. But of the approximately 4,000 two- and four-year institutions in the United States, only about 85 offer any of these things. The Ivy League does not do much better than other institutions in offering services beyond the minimum, but some do list "housing accommodations," accessible vans, and help finding personal care. Bottom line: if a student has his or her heart set on a particular college, it is best to talk with them and then, if things look promising, visit. Visiting is essential for any college that is being seriously considered, as is talking to students with disabilities on the campus.

#### **HOW MUCH INDEPENDENCE IS TOO MUCH?**

One more word of advice on going away to school. A student can avoid disappointment and frustration by being as honest as possible about how ready he or she is to live away from home and family. For any student, going away to college for the first time, with responsibility for personal actions, decisions, and coursework can be overwhelming. Imagine how much more overwhelming it might be if the student also has to arrange for his own personal care; transportation; academic assistance in note taking, research, and writing; wheelchair repair; and healthcare.

These things, in addition to academics and socialization, are the issues that face a student with

a physical disability who chooses to live away from home, even if the school of choice is one of the four that supply such services. If a student can obtain some experience in living away at camp or in an independent living program prior to college, it is a big plus. If such experience is not available, the student may want to consider starting college near home, as a commuter, mastering the academics, and then transferring to a school where on campus living is an option.

#### **COMMUTING: MORE CHOICES, MORE WORK**

Prior to the ADA, a student with physical disabilities would often have to leave home and attend a college that provided the full range of services in order to receive a college education at all. Today, it is much more likely that a student will find that local colleges, universities, and technical schools will be accessible and even have disabilities service personnel. For the student with a moderate degree of physical disability, this means more choices today. For the student with a severe disability, it may just mean more work.

That student will have to put together his or her own package of transportation, eating, toileting and other assistance just to get to campus and stay there during the day. Most local colleges will make clear that these issues are not their responsibility. The student's Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselor at the state Department of Labor may be a source of help and should be consulted. However, while VR helps fund education and training for students with disabilities, their primary focus is on making the student employable. (Incidentally be aware that the rules governing this VR funding and its amounts vary considerably from state to state, particularly if the student is attending college out of state.) The bottom line at a local college is to look for the same things the student needs in a full service college, minus the personal services.

#### **A WORLD AWAY FROM HIGH SCHOOL**

Finally, remember that high school and college are two different worlds, both legally and academically. In public high school, services were automatically provided for the student, IEP meetings were held regularly, parents were responsible for the student's advocacy and accommodations, and teachers stayed on top of student progress. In college, the student must document his disability and request accommodations, he must give permission in order for parents to see his grades, he must advocate for himself, and professors will expect him to follow the syllabus and complete the work as a responsible adult, without reminders.

College is definitely a whole new world, but this is true for all college freshmen. The student with a disability who does research, makes visits to campus, and is honest with himself can still find a remarkably challenging, supportive environment that in the long run makes him an independent, well-educated adult.

#### **ADDED MATERIAL**

Chris Wise Tiedemann is a freelance writer, editor, and disability rights advocate in suburban Atlanta, Georgia. Her son Tommy is currently a college student who has cerebral palsy and has attended Chattahoochee Tech and Edinboro University. Chris is writing a book about finding and utilizing the best colleges for students with physical disabilities. She would welcome comments from those who have experience with this issue at [chris.tiedemann@att.net](mailto:chris.tiedemann@att.net).

tift vans provide transportation for wheelchair users at Edinboro University in this 2004 photo. Photo by Chris Wise Tiedemann.