

Disability Friendly Colleges

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Amy Alexander works at the University of California at Los Angeles, raising money for its alumni-supported Annual Fund. After a bad experience at an inaccessible college in New York, Alexander plans to return to school at UCLA, which landed the No. 7 spot on our survey.

If you've got a disability, choosing a college means thinking about a lot more than just academic facilities and social amenities. This may be your first opportunity to live independently. Will the support you need to live on your own be available? Personal assistance services? Accessible classrooms, transportation and living quarters? Adaptive sports? Will you be able to participate fully in campus life?

Although we couldn't rate every university in the country, we've tried to provide you with a baseline to start from. The schools we chose to describe may not be ideal for you, but they will show you what to look for.

Last winter, *New Mobility* sent a questionnaire to disability resource office (DRO) directors at 50 public universities and colleges selected from the top tier of U.S. News & World Report's annual ranking. The responses varied greatly in detail provided, but a lot of useful information did come in.

Thirty-four schools returned the surveys in time for inclusion in this story, and you'll find that information presented in the charts below. Ten campuses stood out from the crowd, either for some unique program, opportunity or approach to service delivery, or for the less definable attributes that somehow make an environment disability-friendly. We've ranked them in an admittedly arbitrary order. It's important to keep in mind that any one of these schools could be the best for you, or any of hundreds of others we couldn't review.

Some generalizations are possible. Campus focus, for example, has shifted from "physical access" to "programmatic access." That means that every aspect of your major and related studies must be made accessible to you—even if it entails altering locations, field trips or testing procedures—but that not every facility on campus must be fully accessible. The idea is to provide you with equal access to programs, not to fixate on ramps and elevators.

Services range from basic academic resources and accommodations to "one-stop shops" offering strikingly comprehensive services. The disparities sometimes result from funding levels, sometimes from philosophical differences. Many DROs say that, if they take over the functions of other offices—such as tutoring and financial aid—there won't be any incentive for these departments to develop their own staff skills on disability issues. When this theory prevails, the DRO plays a consulting role to faculty and staff, and students with disabilities gain a lot of experience—good and bad—in dealing with the broader university infrastructure. When a DRO takes a more proactive stance by offering a broad range of services, it is usually driven by the desire to tailor services to the individual needs of students with disabilities.

A good but fairly basic menu of services and accommodations might include accessible classrooms and furniture, adaptive equipment assessment and referral, adaptive recreation programs, liaison with faculty and vocational rehabilitation offices, alternative testing formats, grievance resolution, housing advice, TTY network, curriculum modifications, laboratory and library support, mobility assistance, notetakers, paratransit service, parking

accommodations, priority or online registration, referrals for personal assistance services, and sign language instruction and interpreters.

More comprehensive services might include career counseling, community mental health programs in residential halls, crisis intervention, disability management advice, electronic access to libraries and course syllabi, specialized tutoring, peer mentors, support groups, PCA pool, on-site therapists and rehabilitation professionals, internships, work-study programs, overseas study, test-taking center, wheelchair rescue/repair/loan programs, and workshops in self-advocacy, financial management and other disability lifestyle issues.

Our best advice on making a final decision is to give particular weight to the academic quality of the school, the accessibility of the campus and surrounding community, and the services and opportunities available—both on- and off-campus—that will make your disability a non-factor in your ability to take part in the university experience. Herewith, 10 of America's best.

1. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

UIUC has been a leader in services for students with disabilities ever since Tim Nugent founded the Division of Rehabilitation Education Services in 1948. It was the world's first program of its kind (see sidebar for other UIUC firsts). Today, it is UIUC's comprehensive support for students with disabilities, along with its unrivaled wheelchair sports program, that make it our top pick.

Beckwith Hall, the home of UIUC's transitional disability management training program, switched in 1994 from a "provide everything" approach to enabling residents to assume control themselves. For example, staffers still confirm references, conduct background checks and train PCAs, but students do their own interviewing and hiring.

Kat Mayadag, who has spinal muscular atrophy, came to Beckwith as a freshman. "I needed a lot of help," she says, "and my parents had always taken care of me. For somebody who's 18, with absolutely no idea how to screen or interview, it's very overwhelming." For her, Beckwith's services and peer support were lifesavers. "We really bond together," she says. "We push each other to be more independent." Mayadag is now Beckwith's interim director.

Before students finalize course selections, DRES helps them take distance, location and their own endurance into account. Staffers identify travel routes, pinpoint ramps, and stay on top of elevator maintenance and outages. In winter, DRES makes sure students with disabilities have high priority for snow removal.

And there's no ignoring UIUC's athletic programs. Sports were Teresa Brandenburg's lifeblood before her accident during her sophomore year, and they still are. "I can't say enough about this campus," she says. "It's the best coaching I've had in my life." Her hopes now include a berth on the USA Paralympics 2000 team.

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign A History of Firsts:

- First comprehensive program of post-secondary education for people with severe physical disabilities.
- First university with accessible buses.
- First independent living center for those dependent on respiratory devices and/or personal assistance services.
- First rehabilitation service fraternity, Delta Sigma Omicron.
- First formal overseas study program for students with disabilities.
- First collegiate wheelchair basketball teams for both men and women, with varsity letters awarded to wheelchair athletes.

2. University of California at Berkeley

UCB is legendary as the school where Ed Roberts and the Rolling Quads envisioned a program to help students with disabilities participate academically while developing the skills they needed to live independently. That was back in the 1960s.

Today, what distinguishes UCB's Disabled Students' Residence Program is its unswerving focus on student empowerment. Designed for freshmen and transfer students who have not previously directed their own personal care, this two-semester training period turns out confident students primed to live independently. As at UIUC, prospective PCAs are screened through the program's attendant referral service and then interviewed by the student, who makes all final decisions on hiring.

Things have come full circle for Tony Germino, a wheelchair-user who came to the residence program at age 18. "I didn't know about SSI, the department of rehabilitation or funding attendant care," Germino says. He went on to graduate, land a career position in the university's financial aid office and, three years ago, become coordinator of the residence program. "I've wanted this job ever since I was a resident," he says. "I learned so much from this program, and now I have a chance to give back."

After the first year, Germino says, residents are assisted in moving to housing where they can live independently—and there's lots of it available both on and off campus. UCB runs a wheelchair rescue and repair service, and Berkeley's Easy Does It program will pick up any disabled person who calls in stuck within city limits.

"The nice thing about UCB is that whenever there is an area of weakness, we work on it," says Germino. "You don't have to beg people to listen to your issues at Berkeley."

3. Edinboro University of Pennsylvania

EUP, about 20 miles from Erie, Pa., has an outstanding on-campus residence program for students with disabilities. Fifty-four PCAs staff the first floors of Scranton and Shaffer halls 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Charlotte Mainon, a C6 quad, chose EUP for its strong academic program, but personal assistance services were another strong draw.

Mainon likes the resident mix at Scranton—it includes nondisabled students—and gives the on-site help high marks. "If I just want something pulled out or set up, I can call," she says. "It's very relaxed. The rooms are like any other dorm rooms, but they'll put in any special modifications you need."

The extent of the university's commitment to students with disabilities is evident in the Office for Students with Disabilities' range of services: a fleet of modified vans traveling both on and off campus; a wheelchair repair facility; a life skills center staffed by an occupational therapist and rehabilitation nurse; a physical therapy facility; a recreation center with a full-time coach; and a computer lab with state-of-the-art adaptive technology. The school employs more than 80 people as drivers, wheelchair maintenance technicians, meal aides, academic aides and support staff, and recent renovations have made the campus almost totally accessible.

EUP offers an extensive varsity and intramural wheelchair sports program. Mainon joined the Rolling Scots, the varsity wheelchair athletic team, and competed in the Mid-Atlantic Games last spring. "Who would have known," she marvels. "You get to go places you never dreamed of because you found out you have ability you never knew about. What's being offered here is amazing."

4. University of Wisconsin:

Madison and Whitewater campuses

Academically, the Madison campus is the crown jewel in the University of Wisconsin educational system, but the Whitewater campus sparkles on its own merits. Profiling one without the other would be remiss.

Madison campus

As the system's only Ph.D.-granting institution, UW-Madison is known more for its academic programs than its disability services—yet the school has commendable accommodations for students with disabilities.

Situated on 900 notoriously hilly acres, UW-Madison is daunting to wheelers. Ken Adell, a C3-4 quad, considered going to the Whitewater campus for its easier access, but wanted to pursue an advanced degree. On nice days, he can travel the hills in his power chair, but he says it's the paratransit system that makes his education possible on wintry days.

Adell also credits UW-Madison's McBurney Disability Resource Center. Its peer mentor program, run in cooperation with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, offers an impressive array of workshops on all aspects of education.

Here's how accommodations work at UW-Madison: McBurney provides a student with a plan, called a VISA, outlining recommended accommodations. Early each semester, student and professor—guided by the VISA—negotiate the details. "If problems arise," says Trey Duffy, McBurney's director, "the student comes back to us or the professor calls us."

One helpful accommodation is McBurney's electronic reserve system, which saves on trips to the library. The system provides access to all course-related materials submitted by instructors, including syllabi, past exams, problem sets, notes and reading assignments.

According to Adell, whose work as a graduate student involves a major re-engineering of DVR, Wisconsin is the happening place for disability awareness. "The doors are basically being blown open," he says. "It's incredible, and the university system is part of that movement. I couldn't have gotten where I am without it."

Whitewater campus

In 1973, the Board of Regents gave UW-Whitewater a specific mandate to provide optimal services for students with disabilities. Consequently, it is one of the most accessible campuses in the nation. That, along with lower entrance criteria, makes it an easier place for some students with disabilities to start. Transferring to UW-Madison is always an option later.

The emphasis at UW-Whitewater is on development of independent living and workplace skills, an approach that has made the school an attractive place for DVR to refer clients and funnel grant money. Some have characterized the school as a "chrome ghetto"—a place where DVR sends wheelers regardless of their potential for success at other institutions—but John Truesdale, director of UW-Whitewater's Disabled Student Services, disagrees.

"You're talking about maybe 75 wheelchair-users out of 10,500 students," Truesdale says. "They're scattered through all the residence halls and in different majors throughout the campus. But it's not unusual to see people with disabilities on campus, and I think the students like it that way. There's that critical mass needed to get things done."

What gets done is a vast array of services, including a campus physical therapist, rehabilitation nurse and attendant services coordinator, and a paratransit service that operates seven days a week to support UW-Whitewater's work-experience program. Last year, 95 percent of work-experience graduates found employment, while another 3 percent went on to graduate school.

"Everybody here sees inclusion and accessibility as part of their job," says Truesdale. "It's part of our campus mission and everybody takes ownership of it."

5. University of Colorado at Denver

UCD shares space with the Community College of Denver and the Metropolitan State College of Denver on a 127-acre urban campus. Like most campuses, it's an architectural hodgepodge, so the challenge has been to make the campus homogeneously accessible.

Barry Ashworth, a Ph.D. candidate who has multiple sclerosis, says they've done a good job at it. "If you know how things work in one building," he says, "you can get around all the other buildings."

UCD's Disabled Student Services, according to director Karen Rosenschein, isn't a one-stop-shop. "We want university departments to be responsible for their own accessibility," she says. The office does run a tutorial program, and works closely with faculty in an advisory capacity. It publishes twin Disability Resource Handbooks—one for students and another for staff—and the Disability Services Checklist, which assesses how well the entire system is doing on everything from snow removal to service dog relief areas to ADA grievance procedures. UCD earns high grades for coordinated inclusion.

As a commuter campus, UCD has no residence halls. But this is Denver, remember, first-place winner of NM's December 1997 survey of disability-friendly cities, the home of ADAPT, Atlantis and creative advocacy. The city's buses are lift-equipped, and the paratransit service runs door-to-door every day.

When on-campus construction is slated, the disability office notifies wheelchair-using students and helps them plan alternative routes. "It's an extremely proactive approach," says Ashworth. "They don't have to do that. They do it because they're a group of extremely caring people."

6. Florida State University, Tallahassee

FSU, situated in the capital city of Tallahassee, gathers 16 colleges and schools on one sunny, 455-acre campus. Greg Elden, a C3-4 quad, was attracted by the university's strong business program, but praises its accessibility as well.

"Automatic doors open most of the buildings," he says. "Everything is accessible, and if it isn't, they make it accessible." He credits the Student Disability Resource Center for that. "Everyone at SDRC goes the distance to help you. I've had good experiences with teachers here, too. When I took math and finance classes, we worked the problems out together." And instead of relying on volunteer classmates, SDRC pays notetakers to get the information in class. "That's really beneficial," says Elden, "because you get quality notes to study from."

FSU is at the cutting edge of information-age education with the Johnson Adaptive Technology Lab and its pioneering partnership with Lexis-Nexis, which has resulted in Lexis-Nexis Universe. This research service puts more information at the fingertips of students than all the Internet Web sites combined, says Franklin Murphy, FSU's director of communications.

Both FSU and the city of Tallahassee have made access a priority. Look for accessible exercise machines and aquatics programs, a 16-lane lift-equipped pool, wilderness adventure trips and a 73-acre lakefront recreational center with accessible overnight cabins.

Elden says all city buses are accessible and the Dial-A-Ride vans are the best in the state. "They even have a cab company that's accessible," he adds.

7. University of California at Los Angeles

Ten years ago, navigating UCLA on wheels was almost impossible. Today, only two structures out of hundreds remain inaccessible. Much of the positive change can be credited to the Office for Students with Disabilities, seen by some as a model program. OSD has collaborated with the Disabilities and Computing Program to teach new students how to make optimum use of the advanced technology available and to ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to all campus facilities. Accessible housing is now plentiful in UCLA residence halls—although there's still no school-sponsored PCA program—and off-campus in nearby university-owned apartments.

UCLA houses the National Arts and Disability Center, a free resource for artists with disabilities and arts organizations. Olivia Raynor, the center's director, says its sizable database of artists and organizations is a powerful networking tool. "Artists tell me they want to know about their career path from a mainstream perspective," she says. "But they also want to know about it from an artist with a disability who's gone through the experience, so we put students in contact with others in their field."

As a result of NADC's collaboration with OSD, it is now common to see respected performers with disabilities at the Armand Hammer Museum and major exhibitions of disability art on the walls of the Kerckhoff Art Gallery.

Steven Ma, a quad with muscular dystrophy, offers a simple endorsement: "I'm amazed at how well the school accommodates wheelchair-users."

8. University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

UMTC, the largest of Minnesota's four campuses, is located in the heart of the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. The age of the campus makes parking and getting around a bit of a chore, but the breadth of the school's Disability Services just about evens things out.

DS is a one-stop-shop for students with disabilities that goes far beyond the concept of mere "services." In addition to facilitating classroom and testing accommodations, converting materials to alternative formats, reviewing construction and renovation plans, and conducting physical access surveys, DS distributes quarterly newsletters, provides campus-wide training and consultation, and coordinates several federally funded grants targeted at increasing opportunities for students with disabilities.

DS publishes the "Access For Students with Disabilities" guidebook—also available on the university's Web site—and a companion volume for faculty members. Other pluses are a Disability Leadership Training seminar, adaptive recreation programs and accessible exercise equipment.

Currently, about 90 percent of UMTC's buildings are accessible, but not always through the front door. "Sometimes you have to go the long way around," says Jenny Kettler, a sophomore who uses crutches and a motorized scooter. "You have to be really creative. On the other hand, I've never had to make special arrangements for classroom accessibility. Everything seems to be set up. There are always tables for wheelchair-users in the big lecture halls."

In Kettler's opinion, the main barrier to accessibility is snow. That's one problem DS may take longer to solve.

9. Wayne State University, Detroit

Located in downtown Detroit, WSU is flat and easy to navigate, but its best resource may be Handicapper Educational Services. HES positions itself as an "advocating force for students with disabilities ... to improve ... participation in all university programs." But according to Sonya Brown, a C6 quad, HES helps in more personal ways. "They know my timing is off so they stay on top of things for me, like deadlines for financial aid and priority registration. They're a great group of people," she says. Brown lives off-campus and commutes via the city's Metrolift.

Students who want to test the educational waters may find WSU's College of Lifelong Learning (CLL) a good alternative to on-campus study. That's where Brown started before applying to WSU. CLL has an open admissions policy and offers degree programs at off-campus locations. "Students can arrange independent study where they meet with the professor according to a schedule they work out together," says student adviser Frank Williams. Most off-campus classes are held at Oakland Center, a completely accessible building about 20 miles from WSU.

Miriam Braunstein, a WSU journalism graduate who is now assistant editor of *New Mobility*, likes the can-do attitude at HES. "I couldn't have gotten through college without them," she says. "You say, 'This is my problem,' and they say,

'This is what has to get done.' They don't fall into the whole bureaucracy of filling out forms and waiting to see what happens. They fix the problem and you can go on."

10. Texas A&M University, College Station

This enormous campus boasts state-of-the-art laboratories, research facilities and libraries, and a computing services center anchored by a Cray supercomputer and linked to terminals at all colleges and departments. Despite Texas A&M's impressive resources, its Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) has a modest mandate—mainly focusing on academic accommodations, counseling and adaptive equipment.

But for Sara Whitlock, a 20-year-old sophomore with cerebral palsy, SSD has been indispensable. For example, she couldn't get into one key building because of a broken elevator. "SSD met with the physical plant department and was really behind me on that," she says. "I have total access to that building now."

SSD doesn't offer tutoring or a PCA pool, but does advise students on advocacy, accessibility, on-campus housing, transportation and personal assistance services. The support can be informal: SSD counselor Donna Williams, for example, helped Whitlock write a PCA schedule, word her ad, and refine interview questions.

Other SSD assistance is more structured: providing advice to Networks (the disabled students organization), organizing workshops and disability awareness activities, and publication of an accessibility guide.

Seventy-five percent of all off-campus apartment complexes have accessible units, according to Williams, and two nearby complexes are designed exclusively for residents with disabilities.

Despite the vast campus, Whitlock feels at home at Texas A&M. "It's like we're all one, and that's because of the university's strong traditions and sense of family. If you have a problem," Whitlock adds, "they help you find the best way to solve it."

History of Disability Awareness

Disability Awareness Program offered as part of new student orientation:

- U. of Colorado, Denver
- U. of California, Berkeley
- U. of California, San Diego
- U. of California, Los Angeles
- Salisbury University, Md.
- College of New Jersey, Ewing
- U. of Connecticut, Storrs
- U. of Delaware
- Humboldt State U. Calif.
- U. of Minnesota, Twin Cities

Offers a Disability Studies program:

- Texas A & M, College Station, since 1960
- U. of Florida, Gainesville, since 1975
- U. of Minnesota, Minneapolis-St. Paul (developing a minor)

Recreational Amenities, Special Programs On-Campus or Offered Locally:

U. of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

- adaptive strength & conditioning training, adapted physical activity course, track & field, wheelchair basketball

Florida State U., Tallahassee

- 16-lane lift-accessible pool, accessible exercise machines, aquatic program, wilderness & adventure trips

U. of Florida, Gainesville

- adapted P.E. program, one-on-one assistance with adapted equipment in rec center

Penn State U., University Park

- adaptive P.E. course

U. of Colorado, Denver

- adaptive skiing, water-skiing, camping, swimming

U. of Massachusetts, Dartmouth

- accessible swimming pool in athletic center

Salisbury State U., Salisbury, Md.

- hosts wheelchair games

Texas A&M U., College Station

- adaptive class in health and kinesiology program, accommodations provided as requested for sports and recreation programs

U. of Wisconsin, Madison

- adaptive sports & fitness programs

U. of Connecticut, Storrs

- Muscle Max sports lab; School of Allied Health offers individual workout training

U. of Iowa, Iowa City

- adapted weight room

Edinboro U. of Pennsylvania

- wheelchair basketball, football, quad rugby, table tennis, weight lifting, swimming, track & field, archery, scuba, winter sports

U. of California, Berkeley

- works with individuals to custom design recreational programs

U. of California, Los Angeles

- campus sports and recreation activities are programmatically accessible; modifications are made as appropriate

U. of California, Santa Cruz

- accommodations provided on request through P.E. department

U. of California, San Diego

- accessible swimming pool

U. of Delaware, Newark

- accommodations are made to P.E. programs on a case-by-case basis

U. of Washington, Seattle

- boating, skiing, bicycling

Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta

- wheelchair basketball, tennis, fencing, racing, racquetball, bowling, quad rugby, swimming

State U. of N.Y., Binghamton

- swimming pool with lift; student's needs are met through
- individually designed accommodations

U. of Minnesota, Minneapolis-St. Paul

- adaptive rec programs and equipment, wheelchair basketball

U. of Michigan, Ann Arbor

- wheelchair basketball