

Differences between high school and college

If you thought going from elementary school to high school was a big change, get ready! The difference between high school and college can be overwhelming, yet exciting.

In college, you have the freedom to make more of your own decisions and are in charge of what you do. You also need to be responsible and accountable; understanding the differences between high school and college will help you be prepared for these changes.

The following is a comparison between high school and college, based on information compiled by the Minnesota Association for Developmental Education. Not every possible area or scenario has been covered, but there is enough information so you can get a strong sense of how colleges operate.

1 Rules and responsibilities

High School

Following the rules in high school:

- Attending high school is mandatory and is usually free.
- Your time is structured by others.
- You need permission to participate in co-curricular activities.
- Adults will remind you of responsibilities and help you set priorities.
- You are not responsible for knowing what it takes to graduate.
- You are usually corrected if your behavior is out of line.

College

Being responsible in college:

- Attending college is voluntary and can be expensive.
- You manage your own time.
- You must decide whether to participate in co-curricular activities.
- You balance your own classes with the help of an advisor.
- Graduation requirements may change, and you are responsible for knowing what applies to you.
- You are expected to take responsibility for your actions as well the consequences for your decisions.



In high school your time is structured by others. In college, you manage your own time.

2 Classes

High school

High school classes:

- You have limited class choices and the school creates your schedule.
- Generally classes have no more than 35 students.
- You proceed from one class directly to the next.
- You usually spend six hours a day in classes.
- Attendance is taken.
- Textbooks are provided at little or no expense.
- Required classes are the same for all students.
- Modifications that change course rigor, volume or outcomes may be offered based on an IEP.
- You will do most of your studying in class.



College

College classes:

- You choose your classes and set your schedule.
- Classes may have more than 100 students.
- You often have several hours between classes which may be scheduled throughout the day and evening.
- You attend 2–4 classes per day, usually 12–16 hours per week.
- Attendance may or may not be taken, but professors know who misses.
- Textbooks are expensive. The cost is your responsibility.
- Classes are based on a field of study and requirements vary.
- Modifications that change rigor, volume or outcomes will not be offered.
- You will do most of your studying outside of class, at least 2–3 hours outside of class for each hour in class.

In high school, attendance is taken.
In college, attendance may or may not be taken, but professors know who misses.

3 Instructors

High school

High school teachers:

- Teachers remind students of incomplete work.
- Teachers approach students if they feel they need help.
- Teachers are often available for conversation before, during or after class.
- Teachers have been trained in teaching methods to assist in imparting knowledge to students.
- Teachers provide you with information you may have missed if you were absent.
- Teachers present material to help you understand what is in the textbook.
- Teachers often write information on the board to be copied in your notes.
- Teachers impart knowledge and facts, sometimes drawing direct connections and leading you through the thinking process.
- Teachers often take time to remind you of assignments and due dates.
- Teachers bear much of the responsibility for your learning.



In high school, teachers approach students if they feel they need help.

In college, most professors will expect you to contact them if you need assistance.

College

College professors:

- Professors may not remind students of incomplete work.
- Professors are usually open and helpful but most will expect you to initiate contact if you need assistance.
- Professors expect and want you to attend scheduled office hours.
- Professors have been trained as experts in their particular areas of research.
- Professors expect you to get from classmates any information you may have missed when absent.
- Professors may not follow textbooks. You are expected to read on your own. Lectures enhance information from the book.
- Professors may lecture non-stop, expecting you to identify the important points in your notes. When professors write on the board, it may be to amplify the lecture, not to summarize it. Good notes are a must.
- Professors expect you to think independently and make the connection between topics.
- Professors expect you to read, save and refer to the course syllabus to keep track of due dates and assignments.
- You bear the responsibility for your learning while professors serve as guides, mentors and resources.

4 Studying

High school

Studying in high school:

- You may study as little as 0–2 hours per week and this may be to get ready for a test .
- You often need to hear or read material only once to learn all you need about a topic.
- You read short assignments that are then discussed in class and often retaught in class.
- You are frequently told what you need to learn from assigned readings.

College

Studying in college:

- You may need to study at least 2–3 hours for each hour of class.
- You will need to continually review class notes and text information to learn course materials.
- You may be assigned large amounts of reading and writing that may not be discussed in class.
- It is up to you to understand what must be learned from reading assignments. Lectures and assignments proceed from the assumption that you have already read the material.
- Peer mentors are available to study with and support students with an intellectual disability.

5 Tests

High school

Tests in high school:

- Testing is frequent and covers small amounts of material.
- Makeup tests are often available.
- Teachers may rearrange test dates to avoid conflict with school event times.
- Teachers frequently conduct review sessions.
- Mastery is usually seen as the ability to reproduce what you were taught in the form in which it was presented to you.

College

Tests in college:

- Tests may be infrequent and cover large amounts of material and could be cumulative. You, not the professor, organize the material to prepare for a test.
- Makeup tests are often not available.
- Professors in different courses usually schedule tests without regard to the demands of other courses or outside activities.
- Professors usually do not offer review sessions, and when they do, they expect the student to come with questions and be an active participant.
- Mastery is often seen as the ability to apply what you have learned to new situations or to solve new kinds of problems.



In high school, you may study as little as 0–2 hours per week.

In college, you may need to study 2–3 hours for each hour of class.

6 Grades

High school

High school grades:

- Grades are given for most assigned work.
- Good homework grades may help to raise poor test scores.
- Extra credit options are usually available to raise your grade.
- Initial tests are usually not counted, especially if they are low.
- You may graduate as long as you have passed all required courses with a grade of D or better.

College

College grades:

- Assigned work may or may not be graded.
- Tests and major papers provide the majority of the grade, but a grade may be lowered if homework is not done.
- Extra credit options are usually not available to raise a course grade.
- First tests reveal expectations of the instructor and are usually a part of the final grade.
- You may graduate only if your average in classes meets the departmental standard—typically a 2.0 (C) or better.



In high school, you may get another chance to raise your grade if your score is low.
In college, your first test grade is usually part of the final grade.

7 Support services

High school

Special education in high school:

- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) applies to high schools.
- Students receive special education and related services based upon identified needs.
- Behavior can be viewed as a manifestation of the disability, and different behavior standards are allowed.
- Accommodations and modifications are communicated to the teachers by the case manager.
- Modifications that change course rigor, volume or outcomes may be offered based on an IEP.
- Services are delivered to the student.
- The school informs the parents of your progress.
- The case manager and/or parent act as your advocate.
- Schools are required to identify students with disabilities through free assessments.
- Services may include individually designed instruction, curriculum modifications and accommodations based on an IEP.
- There are regular meetings to discuss your progress.

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College

Disability services in college:

- State law, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) apply to colleges.
- Disability services are available.
- You must meet the college's behavioral conduct standards.
- Modifications are usually not available, and you must request and discuss accommodations yourself.
- Modifications that change rigor, volume or outcomes will not be offered.
- You must request services through the disability services office.
- The school cannot communicate with your parents without your permission.
- You need to be your own advocate.
- You are responsible for disclosing your disability, providing current documentation and paying for an assessment if needed.
- Reasonable accommodations for access are available. The 504 Plan and IEP end upon high school graduation.
- You are responsible to monitor your own progress.

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In high school, your case manager or parent act as your advocate. In college, you need to be your own advocate.

7 Support services (*continued*)

High school

Special education in high school:

- Assessment, physical therapy and personal care are provided by the high school.
- School personnel seek you out and decide what services and support you can receive.
- You receive services in a special education classroom or from a related service provider.
- Documentation is coordinated by a school psychologist or appointed staff person. The high school staff develops an IEP from documentation, and testing is provided and paid for the school.
- IDEA provides the mandate and funding to schools for in-school special education services as well as transportation/buses to school, physical, occupational, speech therapy, and tutoring.

College

Disability services in college:

- You are responsible for arranging and paying for personal services and medical care.
- You must request help; no one will come to find you.
- You receive access services from a designated person or office, and the service model may differ from college to college.
- You must provide information about your disability (documentation), and colleges can set their own guidelines for documentation. After high school, you may be required to pay for a new evaluation if one is needed.
- Colleges are required to offer reasonable accommodations and support services, not services of a personal nature. Tutoring is usually not offered through disability services, but is generally a service available to all students. It is your responsibility to arrange for the transportation and therapy you need.



In high school, school personnel seek you out and decide what services and support you can receive. In college, you must request help; no one will come to find you.