



**MEDICAL STUDENTS WITH
DISABILITY AND CHRONIC ILLNESS**
Community. Advocacy. Education. Accessibility.

MSDCI Guide to Accessing Disability Accommodations

During Undergraduate Medical Education

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1-2
Disability Service Providers	3-5
What to expect when seeking accommodations	
Timeline.....	6-8
Materials.....	9-13
Financial Obligations.....	14-15
Accommodations in UME	
During the preclinical phase.....	16-18
During the clinical phase.....	19-23
For USLME Exams.....	24-28
For the MCAT.....	29-31
For the CASPer Test.....	32-34
Disclosure.....	35-36
For UME interviews.....	37-40
For acquisition of new disability.....	41-43
Navigating denial of accommodations.....	44-46
Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School	
Introduction.....	47-51
Resources on an Institutional Level.....	52-57
Resources at a State Level.....	58-59
Resources on the National level.....	60-65
Conclusions.....	66
Additional Resources	
Email examples.....	67-71
Tips for self-advocacy.....	72
Resources for mentorship and community.....	73
Further reading.....	74



Introduction

This document has been compiled by members of **Medical Students with Disability and Chronic Illness** (MSDCI: www.msdc.org). MSDCI is a student-led, national organization that seeks to unite and empower medical students through advocacy, mentorship, education, and community building while using our collective power towards advancing the improvement of healthcare for the disabled community.

MSDCI has created this guide to assist learners who need accommodations in medical school. Here, we will explain the process of acquiring and utilizing accommodations at the different stages of undergraduate medical education (UME), as well as potential pitfalls in the process.

Because of the highly variable nature of disability services, curricula, and faculty at individual medical schools, this guide offers neither an authoritative nor exhaustive description of the accommodations process which will necessarily depend on the individual students' needs at their respective institutions. Instead, it is designed to serve as a **starting point** for learners to become aware of and acquainted with different aspects of the accommodations system, as well as their rights under the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**.



Introduction

We also list additional resources at the end of this document which may help to fill in the gaps for students that are seeking more information.

We sincerely hope that this guide helps students. Having a disability, chronic illness, temporary impairment, or anything else that requires accommodations in medical school is not easy. It can be very, very hard. The stakes in medical school are high, and the pace is rapid. This can make the process of accessing accommodations overwhelming, even for those learners who have had prior experience navigating this process in previous learning environments.

We want to support all disabled and chronically ill learners as best we can, and make things just a little bit easier by having all of this information in one place.

You may have questions, comments, ideas or concerns about the information contained in this document. If so, please reach out to MSDCI at msdcinational@gmail.com or Nora Newcomb at ndnewcomb@usf.edu.



Disability Service Providers

Disability Service Providers or DSPs for short (also known as student disability services, disability resource professionals, disability resource providers) are individuals designated by the institution to review, assess, and determine a student's disability-related services and reasonable accommodations. They are responsible for ensuring equal access for students with disabilities and for determining reasonable accommodations in accordance with the law.

DSPs within a medical education program should be neutral third-party experts; in other words, a person who does **not** serve in an evaluative or academic decision-making role. DSPs help determine a student's disability-associated needs and context-appropriate accommodations during both preclinical and clinical training.

DSPs are appointed by the institution and should be readily searchable online. A Disability Resource Office or service provider can usually be located by a cursory internet search: “disability accommodations *institution*” or “disability service provider *institution*” or “disability service professional *institution*”. Graduate programs (which include medical schools) that are associated with an undergraduate school may share one Disability Resource Office.



Disability Service Providers

If an online search does not turn up any information, then it may be worthwhile to reach out to a trusted faculty member or student dean for referral to the correct professional. However, students should know that they do not have to provide any diagnostic documentation or information to faculty in order to receive a referral or receive accommodations.

DSPs: Pros & Cons

Pros	Cons
DSPs are familiar with disability civil rights legislation and can advocate for students with a range of disability. Thus, DSPs are a key ally for students with disability.	Research demonstrates significant variability in the quality of services rendered by DSPs at medical institutions.
DSPs are familiar with the process of requesting accommodations on high-stakes exams and disability barriers within subspecialties of medicine.	DSPs appointed by an institution may lack training specific to medical education, and thus be unfamiliar with the disability barriers unique to medicine.
DSPs can connect students who have disabilities to more senior students or physician faculty members who have disabilities for mentorship and community-building to help the student navigate medical school and applying for residency.	Some institutions utilize a committee approach to determine reasonable accommodations which may increase risk of bias and breach of confidentiality. Ideally, a DSP should lead the committee and uphold the student's privacy.



Disability Service Providers

Know Your Rights

Students do not have to provide diagnostic documentation to any faculty, dean, administrator, or any individual with an evaluative or academic decision-making role in order to be referred for or to receive accommodations.

Students can stop the interactive process at any time and ask for the disability resource office and/or institution-appointed disability service provider.



What to Expect When Seeking Accommodations

We recommend reaching out to your school's DSP as a first step to ensure that the process is as efficient as possible. However, it is helpful to know what to expect. Read on for an overview of common factors relevant to seeking accommodations.

Timeline

It is best to contact the DSP at your institution as soon as possible after admission and/or after the need for accommodations arises. It takes time for the DSP to review the applicable documents and respond with their decision which may be: approval, denial, or request for more information. Once approved, it can take hours to months to implement an effective accommodation depending on its nature.

DSP offices should offer a phone number and email online through which to contact them. If you are not sure where to start in the application process, it can be very helpful to contact the office directly and ask about the timeline and materials specific to that institution. You can also always request an introductory face-to-face meeting.



Timeline

Sometimes, you may not recognize the need for accommodations until starting your academic work. If you previously had an accommodation that you no longer use, it may still be helpful to prepare for the possibility of needing that accommodation. You can do this by contacting the DSP office in advance and working with them to create a plan so that accommodation will be in place if you need it.

The process of implementing accommodations will vary by institution, but may go something like this:

1. Submit requested documentation to DSP office by email, mail, or online portal.
2. Meet with the DSP to discuss the documentation and the accommodation implementation plan.
3. The DSP will contact you regarding the approval of your request and next steps.
4. Once your accommodations are approved, the DSP will contact the relevant parties (e.g. instructor, interpreters, etc.) with only pertinent information for providing accommodations (they will not provide any extraneous health information or confidential information).
5. Following approval, you may need to communicate with the faculty of your courses to ensure that they will be available to you in a timely and effective manner.



Timeline

You may find that some environments require more or different accommodations than others. Depending on a number of factors (e.g. your personal comfort, instructor receptiveness, accommodation needed), you might wish to consider informal accommodations, or a verbal agreement directly between you and your educators that they will navigate your personal circumstances.

Informal accommodations allow for more flexibility and open communication with your faculty should the need for accommodation arise. However, these arrangements are tenuous and do not come with any guarantee of further accommodation. Informal accommodations can be useful in some situations, but should be approached with caution.

Plan Ahead

If you have received accommodations in the past, consider reaching out to your DSP in the event that you may potentially need them in the future. Understand that informal accommodations, while helpful in some situations, are tenuous at best and may not be guaranteed when you need them.



Materials

Documentation of disability may include:

- Portions of educational, psychologist, neurocognitive, or medical records
- Reports and assessments by healthcare providers, psychologists, or an educational system
- Documents that reflect education and accommodation history, such as standardized exam accommodation confirmation (such as for the SAT, ACT, GRE, MCAT) or a previous institution's accommodation verification letter (such as from high school, college, graduate school, etc)
- Score reports from previous standardized tests you have taken (regardless of whether or not you received accommodations on those examinations)
- DSP Disability Documentation Forms for mental health and medical conditions
- Vocational Assessments
- Statement from a health or other service professional - read more about provider letters/attestations on the next two pages!



Materials

A provider letter or attestation is one form of disability documentation that is generally required to determine eligibility for accommodation services. It may not be the only method to communicate your needs (see “Timeline” and “Materials”) but serves as a foundation for accessing disability services.

Letters are often required to obtain accommodations through a DSP office, though they are less commonly a part of informal accommodations, such as those negotiated with an individual instructor.

The letter should be written by a certified professional who is familiar with your disability and has assessed you recently (e.g. not your childhood primary care doctor who hasn’t seen you in 10 years; not a cardiologist if you have a mobility disability).

Examples of certified professionals include:

- Physicians
- Educational psychologists/learning specialists
- Audiologists
- Therapists
- Mobility specialists
- Rehabilitation counselors



Materials

A provider letter should include sufficient information about your disability to understand the requested accommodation(s).

Though it varies by institution, this might include:

A description of the disability, including diagnosis and history

A description of the current impact in daily living and in an educational setting

A description of the expected duration, frequency, severity, and progression of the conditions

Plan Ahead

Make a list of what documentation you already have and what additional/updated information you still need.

For further reading on disability documentation for accommodations:

<https://www.ahead.org/professional-resources/accommodations/documentation>



Materials

Some DSPs may also request that you complete a written application as part of your request for accommodations.

Questions might include:

Basic personal information (e.g. name, contact information, program of study, etc.)

Your reason for the request (i.e. disability or diagnosis)

Detail the accommodations you are requesting for various environments (e.g. classroom, campus housing, recreational facilities)

Explain how the accommodation is necessary for your disability

Explain why you cannot perform without this accommodation

Detail past use of similar accommodations

Some institutions require a conversation with the requesting student to better understand their written materials and ensure success of implementation. It may be helpful to request in advance the questions that will be asked of you to prepare and ensure you are familiar with what constitutes appropriate and legal questions rather than extraneous ones that it is within your right not to answer.



Materials

Know Your Rights

DSPs can only ask for medical records as it pertains to the request for accommodations. A DSP should not access your medical records in their entirety or communicate with your providers in your absence or without your consent.

Instead, you should provide only the portions of your medical record needed to support your request.

Remember, you are in control of your own information. While you want to provide enough information to facilitate an efficient and effective implementation of accommodations, it is your right to withhold information at any time.



Financial Obligations

You may be concerned about who is responsible for paying for accommodations. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, institutions are required to provide reasonable accommodations to qualified students, except when the accommodation causes undue hardship. Because “undue hardship” is not specified, the term is left up to interpretation by the institution. In most cases, this hardship is assessed in terms of financial difficulty in paying for the accommodation.

According to experts on disability accommodations for health science trainees in the book ‘Disability as Diversity’, the undue hardship exemption has almost never been successful in an educational context since institutions as a whole are required to fund reasonable accommodations. Institutions as a whole are likely to have the means to fund reasonable accommodations, thus the undue hardship clause does not apply.

Institutions take varied approaches to funding student accommodations with approaches ranging from centralized institutional funding to program-specific funding. In most cases, the disability resource office will cover the expenses associated with accommodations by using the disability resource office budget or by tapping into a centralized institutional fund.



Financial Obligations

Know Your Rights

Students are not financially responsible for ensuring equal access through reasonable accommodation. Institutions are. The cost of an accommodation and responsibility for providing the accommodation ultimately rests on the institution, regardless of the method for funding or budget structure.

Students do not have to pay any fee or cost to apply for accommodations. However, there may be hidden costs associated with obtaining medical care and disability documentation that is necessary during the application process.



Accommodations in UME During the Preclinical Phase

When requesting new accommodations, start the process as soon as you realize that you need accommodations.

If you have had informal accommodations in the past or needed occasional informal accommodations at other points in your education, we recommend that you reach out to and meet with your school's DSP as soon as possible. It is imperative to initiate these discussions early so that you avoid a potential crisis and can perform optimally in medical school.

If there is no established liaison or you are not sure of the right person to contact, reach out to a trusted faculty or staff member to see if they can put you in contact with the appropriate person or office. If you are not sure who to approach, the Dean of Students/Student Affairs is a good place to start. They will likely be able to help you find the right person to contact. You do not need to provide the Dean of Students/Student Affairs with any diagnostic information when asking for referral.



Accommodations in UME During the Preclinical Phase

Check if there is an accommodation request guide for your school. Familiar yourself with the school's technical standards and accommodations policies, as these differ between institutions. Depending on your school, you may have to do multiple hours of work during this process. Keep an open line of communication with your DSP. Stay organized and be thorough, as errors in documentation may result in delayed or denied approval!

Your school will likely need documentation from your healthcare providers. Depending on your disability and your school's policy, this could range from a letter from your doctor to specific testing and results. This process can take a while, so this is another reason to start early!

Plan Ahead

Create a document to help keep track of the process. Copy and paste your school's policy for easy reference. Keep a running list of the names, roles, and contact information of the people you need to contact. Make a list of documents that you need to submit and their corresponding deadlines.



Accommodations in UME During the Preclinical Phase

Additional Considerations

Have a conversation with your DSP and/or other individual helping you with the process about the types of accommodations you might need. We recommend that you ask about accommodations other students have had in the past to help give you an idea of what might help you. Advocate for yourself. There is no shame in asking for what you need and pushing for other solutions.

You may be entitled to **“emergency” or temporary accommodations** if there is a current lack of documentation, but there is belief that you will be entitled to accommodations once your disability documentation is reviewed.

Examples of accommodations:

- Additional time on exams/quizzes
- Quiet room to take exams/quizzes
- Use of assistive technology devices in the classroom/lab
- Use of service animal
- Note-taking services
- Excused absences/excused tardiness for medical appointments or disease flare-ups
- Access to leave classroom for “bio breaks” including meds/food/restroom



Accommodations in UME During the Clinical Phase

Disability accommodations must be provided in clinical settings, just as in preclinical settings. However, the accommodations may change in the clinical setting due to the interactive patient-care setting that is inherently different from the didactic setting.

It is best to begin the process of requesting clinical accommodations well before the start of your clinical rotations. Given the complex nature of clinical rotations (multiple sites, numerous preceptors, etc.), it may take several months to put together a cohesive plan, especially if you have concerns about technical standards. Similar to our guidance for accommodations during preclinical medical education, we recommend you work with a DSP to formalize any previously informal accommodations and discuss the potential barriers you may face in the clinical setting.

Given the uniquely complex nature of medical training, it is possible that your DSP may not know all of the available accommodations for clinical training. The DSP must contact the involved faculty to determine what accommodations are reasonable.



Accommodations in UME During the Clinical Phase

If the DSP is not familiar with the requirements of clinical clerkships, they must contact the relevant program staff or faculty. In this case, we recommend also reaching out to a trusted advisor at your medical school, the director of your medical school's clerkship program, or a Dean, who may be able to better speak to the clinical responsibilities of a medical student and possible accommodation options. **Remember, you are not obligated to share any diagnostic information when speaking with advisors or administrators at your medical school.**

We strongly emphasize the need for maintaining open lines of communication with your DSP, clerkship director and any other advisors who are involved in the accommodations process throughout your clinical years. It may be difficult to predict how your accommodations and your access needs will fit into different clinical environments; solutions that seem great on paper may not translate well into practice. Be prepared to reevaluate your approach, and encourage your accommodations team to be flexible as well. If you have specific concerns, it may be worthwhile to see if you can “trial run” your accommodations (e.g. modified physical exam technique, sterile coverings for DMEs) during the preclinical years.



Accommodations in UME During the Clinical Phase

Similar to our recommendations for pre-clinical phase accommodations, we advise referring to your school's technical standards and accommodations policies for additional guidance. It is possible you will need additional medical documentation to attest to your accommodation needs for clinical rotations that differ from your needs during your pre-clinical training. Be sure to leave sufficient time to discuss these needs with your healthcare providers and obtain appropriate documentation.

Many students also have changing accommodation needs based on different phases of their disability or chronic illness. If that is the case, **it is always best to ensure documentation reflects the accommodations that would be needed at your most impacted state**, so that you are not faced with additional administrative barriers during such times. If you have an unexpected change in your accommodation needs during your rotations, you may seek emergency accommodations, though your institution may still ask for supporting documentation after the fact, and be in frequent communication with your DSP if this occurs.



Accommodations in UME During the Clinical Phase

While there is no comprehensive list of possible clinical accommodations for clinical medical students, here are some examples that may provide some assistance as you navigate accommodations at your institution:

Additional time on end-of-rotation shelf exams

Quiet room to take end-of-rotation shelf exams

Work hour limits for clinical duties (i.e. 8 hours per day, 5 days per week)

Access to seating during rounds, in surgical procedures, or during patient visits

Ability to take “bio breaks” as needed for food/meds/restroom

Protected recovery periods between assigned day and night shifts

Access to certain equipment or assistive technologies

Excused absences or leaves from clinical duties for medical appointments

Accommodated make-up days for missed clinical duties due to health flare-ups

Access to refrigerated space for storage of medication needed during your clinical hours

Alternate scheduling of clerkships (i.e. one week on, one week off)



Accommodations in UME During the Clinical Phase

Please note that while these suggestions may be permitted by your institution, there is no overarching body that currently determines the breadth of appropriate accommodations. Therefore, it is ultimately up to each medical school and their disability services office to approve specific accommodations for students. Our goal in providing these suggestions is to offer a starting point for discussion, rather than an exact list of accommodations for any individual student.

To learn more about what accommodations may be possible, we recommend consulting the following book which details accommodations in didactics, lab, and clinical settings for healthcare trainees with disabilities:

- **Equal Access for Students with Disabilities: The Guide for Health Science and Professional Education.** Lisa M. Meeks, Neera R. Jaine, & Elisa P. Laird. 2020.
<https://www.springerpub.com/equal-access-for-students-with-disabilities-9780826182227.html>



Accommodations in UME For USMLE Exams

Disclaimer

The following links and timelines are all accurate to when this document was written, however requirements and forms may have changed.

Please consult with your school's testing specialist and the USMLE website yourself to prepare for this process.

Your application requesting accommodations for USMLE exams should be submitted several months in advance of when you would like to take your examination. We recommend that you begin this process at least 5 months in advance of your desired test date. Allowing ample time for this process will also allow you to select your date of choice for the exam.

The NBME requests at least 60 business days for processing each request. Since the application requires you to gather documents supporting your need for an accommodation and write a personal statement, preparing the application can also take several days to weeks.



Accommodations in UME For USMLE Exams

Documents required to submit a request for accommodations on USMLE exams:

1. “USMLE Request for Test Accommodations” document
 - Fill out pages 2-6 of the following form:
<https://www.usmle.org/pdfs/test-accommodations/accom-request-form.pdf>
2. Personal statement
 - This document should describe your disability and how your disability impacts your daily life and education
 - Length: ~1 page
3. “Certification of Prior Test Accommodations Form”
 - This form needs to be sent to a medical school official to document any accommodations received in medical school
 - Allow enough time for this document to get filled out
4. Evaluation from a healthcare professional
 - This information should come from a qualified professional documenting your disability.
5. Supporting documentation
 - This section will vary greatly from person to person.
 - Examples of supporting documentation include academic records; score transcripts for previous standardized exams; verification of prior academic/test accommodations; relevant medical records; previous psychoeducational evaluations; faculty or supervisor feedback; job performance evaluations; clerkship/clinical course evaluations; etc



Accommodations in UME For USMLE Exams

Submit your accommodations request by emailing the required documents in PDF form to disabilityservices@nbme.org.

Once your request is processed, you will receive an email that your request for accommodations has been approved or denied.

Once your request has been approved, you will wait for an additional email from NBME with your scheduling permit indicating your approved accommodation. Once you have the scheduling permit, you must call Prometric to schedule your exam with the approved accommodations. Importantly, you may not use the online scheduling system as this system does not yet support examinees with accommodations.

Plan Ahead

Gather your information and store it in a secure file on your computer for easy access in the future. It will make your life easier.



Accommodations in UME For USMLE Exams

For subsequent USMLE examinations, begin the process at least 5 months in advance. For each additional USMLE examination that you would like accommodations for, you must submit another request for accommodations. However, the form for subsequent accommodations is abbreviated: <https://www.usmle.org/pdfs/test-accommodations/accom-subsequent-request-form.pdf>

You will be asked to upload another personal statement. Simply add a sentence to your previous personal statement explaining how your Step 1 accommodation helped you.

Again, you will need to wait until this request is approved and you are issued a scheduling permit to schedule your Step 2 or 3 examination. Call Prometric to schedule your exam.

Plan Ahead

Read more about USMLE testing accommodations:
<https://www.usmle.org/test-accommodations/>



Accommodations in UME For USLME Exams

Apply for accommodations before scheduling your test.

Know Your Rights

Medical schools or residency programs will **not** know whether you tested with accommodations on USMLE exams.

Students with disabilities do not have to disclose testing accommodations to medical schools or residency programs.



Accommodations in UME For the MCAT

Disclaimer

The following links and timelines are all accurate to when this document was written, however requirements and forms may have changed.

Please consult with your school's testing specialist and the MCAT website yourself to prepare for this process.

Pre-medical students can also test with accommodations on the MCAT. Medical schools will not know whether you tested with accommodations, and you do not have to disclose this information to them.

Begin the process by consulting the AAMC website and section on MCAT Exam with Accommodations:

<https://students-residents.aamc.org/mcat-exam-accommodations/mcat-exam-accommodations>



Accommodations in UME For the MCAT

Requirements for requesting accommodations on the MCAT:

1. Review [MCAT Essentials](#) and [standard testing conditions](#) to determine whether/what kind of accommodations you need.

Examples of accommodations:

- Additional testing time
- Additional/extended breaks
- Continuous/immediate food/drink access
- Alternative testing environment

2. Prepare your [MCAT Accommodations Online \(MAO\) application](#).

- Profile, condition, and history
- Personal statement
- Current comprehensive evaluation
- Academic and medical supporting documentation (i.e. transcripts, test scores, previous accommodations/evaluations)

3. Submit MAO application at least 60 days (we recommend at least 90 days) before the “[Silver Zone Deadline](#)” associated with your preferred exam date

- You should hear back within 60 days
- Reconsiderations (with new supporting information), appeals (without new information), or extensions (for prior AMCAS-approved accommodations) are due at least 30 days before the “Silver Zone Deadline” associated with your preferred exam date



Accommodations in UME For the MCAT

Apply for accommodations before scheduling your test. Accommodations are generally valid until the end of the following testing year.

Utilize the [Low Cost Evaluation Options Table](#), [AAMC Fee Assistance Program](#), and [Accommodations Financial Benefit](#) to help manage costs.

Know Your Rights

Medical schools will not know whether you tested with accommodations on the MCAT.

Students with disabilities do not have to disclose testing accommodations to medical schools.



Accommodations in UME For the CASPer Test

Disclaimer

The following links and timelines are all accurate to when this document was written, however requirements and forms may have changed.

Please consult with your school's testing specialist and the CASPer website yourself to prepare for this process.

Pre-medical and medical students may need to take the CASPer test during the application process. Medical schools and residency programs will not know whether you tested with accommodations, and you do not have to disclose this information to them.



Accommodations in UME For the CASPer Test

Requirements for requesting accommodations on the CASPer Test:

1. Review the [Altus Assessments Accommodations Policy](#), especially the “Casper Conditions and Technical Requirements” section to determine whether/what kind of accommodations you need.

Examples of accommodations:

- Additional testing time
- Text-to-voice/speech-to-text software
- Scribe or reader

2. Prepare your Altus Suite accommodations materials.

- Completed registration for a CASPer test
- [Accommodations Request Forms 1 and 2](#). Part 1 is the Candidate Form filled out by you. Part 2 is the Medical Form filled out by a licensed qualified professional, including disability information and recommended accommodations.
- Additional supporting documentation

3. Submit materials to support@altus.as at least 3 weeks (we recommend at least 1 month) before your scheduled exam date.

- You should hear back (approved, denied, or further information requested) within 5 business days.
- If denied, you have 7 business days to launch an appeal with the Altus Review Panel.



Accommodations in UME For the CASPer Test

Apply for accommodations after scheduling your test. Accommodations are generally valid for two admissions cycles.

If you need to retake the CASPer, you must email support@altus.as at least 2 weeks prior to your new test date to ensure they apply your accommodations again

Know Your Rights

Medical schools will not know whether you tested with accommodations on the CASPer Test.

Students with disabilities do not have to disclose testing accommodations to medical schools.



Disclosure during the UME Application Process

Disclosure during the application process is a highly personal choice! There is no right or wrong answer on whether or how you should disclose your disability.

We recommended some areas of your written application to medical schools where you have the opportunity to disclose if you would like to.

In the primary AMCAS application:

- **“Experience” section.**
 - We recommend the experience section if your most important work, volunteer, or extracurricular experiences relate to your disability.
- **Personal Statement.**
 - We recommend the personal statement if your disability has driven your goal of becoming a provider and/or if your disability has shaped who you are and what you want schools to know about you.



Disclosure during the UME Application Process

Schools send out secondary applications to ask additional questions to get to know you better as person and present the opportunity to expand on your experiences, skills, and values. Below are some past questions from secondaries where you could discuss your disability.

In the secondary applications:

- “What area of medicine do you envision yourself working in at the end of your training? What is shaping your vision?”
- “Share with us a difficult or challenging situation you have encountered and how you dealt with it.”
- “Discuss how you have identified and responded to adversity.”
- “Do you consider yourself a person who would contribute to the diversity of the student body?”
- “Anything else to tell us?”
- “If there is an important aspect of your personal background or identity, not addressed elsewhere in the application, that you would like to share with the Committee, we invite you to do so here.”



Accommodations in UME For Interviews

First things first, **CONGRATULATIONS!** Whether they're virtual or in-person and whether you get one or ten, interviews should be as much about you getting to know the school as about the school getting to know you. Here are some things to keep in mind as you prepare for interview day.

When you receive an interview invitation, it should include an itinerary for the day. This information can give you a better understanding of what accommodations you may need.

Some questions to keep in mind that are common to interviews:

- Will there be a campus tour?
- How long will you have to travel/transition between interviews?
- How many breaks will you have and how long will they be?
- What style will the interviews be (i.e. one-on-one vs. group vs. multiple mini interviews)?
- Will there be any supplementary written activities?



Accommodations in UME For Interviews

If you need accommodations or are unsure, reach out either to the admissions staff that emailed you the interview offer or the school's office of disability services as soon as possible.

Regardless of whether you've disclosed your disability in the application process, it is still your decision whether to discuss it in an interview.

If you have not already disclosed your disability, **your interviewer cannot ask you about it.** For example, they cannot ask whether you have a disability or what accommodations you may need as a student or how you will navigate your disability as a medical professional. **If they ask, you have every right to refuse to answer, change the subject, or respond however you wish.**

If you'd like to report this behavior afterwards, reach out to the school's admissions office, their office of disability services, or someone at your home institution (i.e. professor/pre-med advisor/mentor) who can communicate the situation to the medical school on your behalf.



Accommodations in UME For Interviews

If you've written extensively about your disability in your application (i.e. your personal statement/volunteer or work experience centers on how your disability has shaped you as an individual and will shape your career), it's possible that an interviewer could ask you about it as it pertains to what you've already shared.

They could say something like this: "In your application, you shared how your experience with *x disability* has driven your goals for pursuing medicine and the patient population you wish to work with. Could you speak more about why this work is important to you and the medical field at large?" They cannot ask you specifics of your disability or ask you to reveal any medical information.

Remember, any question must be grounded in information you have already spoken about, and regardless of what you've disclosed, you still get to decide whether to discuss your disability.



Accommodations in UME For Interviews

Know Your Rights

If, when, and how you disclose your disability is up to you. It is your decision and yours alone. You do not have to disclose your disability or any testing accommodations during the application process to medical schools or residency programs.

Your interviewers or any other staff at the medical school cannot legally ask you directly about your disability and/or accommodations regardless of whether you have disclosed or not.

The information you share about your disability is always your decision.



Accommodations in UME For Acquisition of New Disability

Whether you are in your pre-clinical or clinical years, you may find yourself in the position of having unexpectedly acquired a temporary disability that can impact your ability to complete your schoolwork. You may already have a disability and experience a complication or flare-up that introduces new limitations.

Examples include:

- Injuries and accidents
- Flare-ups
- Hospitalization
- Recovery from surgery
- Concussion
- Medical workup

While you may choose to use informal channels to seek accommodations (i.e. speaking with individual faculty or clerkship directors, for example), it may be necessary to seek formal accommodations in order to protect yourself during this time. Therefore, you may consider reaching out to your school's office of disability services to acquire an **accommodation determination letter**.



Accommodations in UME For Acquisition of New Disability

The DSP may ask you to submit a clinical verification form and/or other documentation that details why your current condition requires accommodations. It is therefore helpful to establish a “paper trail” of evaluations with a clinician as soon as possible after acquiring a disability.

Your DSP and/or disability services office will work with you on figuring out what accommodations suit your needs. Keep the wording of the letter as broad as possible, especially if you are planning to use it during clinical rotations, which are varied and unpredictable on their demands and often require working with several different faculty in a short period of time.

Depending on the nature of your disability and if you are in the pre-clinical or clinical environment, you may have to reach out multiple times to your DSP or disability services office if you find your accommodations are not meeting your needs. For instance, you may not know what the physical or mental demands of clinical rotations are until you actually do them, and may need to modify or add to your original accommodations.



Accommodations in UME For Acquisition of New Disability

Your accommodations letter may be shared by your DSP and/or disability services office with the Dean of Students/Dean of Student Affairs. **This letter should not discuss a diagnosis or any medical information.** It should only cover what accommodations you have.

The Dean of Students/Student Affairs may ask to go over your letter in order to better support you and understand your needs. **You do not have to disclose personal medical information to anyone outside of your DSP.**



Navigating Denial of Accommodations

This guide has been written to reflect the current best practices in the field of disability accommodations for UME students. It is possible that your institution will not follow these practices, and you will be wrongly denied accommodations. It is also possible that they do follow best practices, and you will get denied anyway. Don't panic. You are not alone. You can appeal.

We recommend consulting the following books to learn more about the accommodations process from a legal standpoint:

- **Disability as Diversity: A Guidebook for Inclusion in Medicine, Nursing, and the Health Professions.** Lisa M. Meeks & Leslie Neal-Boyland. 2020.
<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-46187-4>
- **Equal Access for Students with Disabilities: The Guide for Health Science and Professional Education.** Lisa M. Meeks, Neera R. Jaine, & Elisa P. Laird. 2020.
<https://www.springerpub.com/equal-access-for-students-with-disabilities-9780826182227.html>

If necessary, you may need to hire legal counsel (especially for high stakes testing - there are lawyers who specialize in this).



Navigating Denial of Accommodations

The ADA requires institutions to make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities unless the institution can demonstrate that the modification would **“fundamentally alter the nature”** of the educational program. A fundamental alteration occurs when an aspect of the medical program is modified in such a way that it changes the nature of the educational program being offered, rather than providing equal access to the program. But sometimes institutions can still provide an accommodation even if it fundamentally alters a course. For example, a student with a disability who requests to take a medical course or clerkship virtually rather than in-person may be denied that accommodation because the medical curriculum would be “fundamentally altered” by the change. However, during COVID-19 times when schools have developed equivalent virtual curricula, this stipulation may not hold because the course will therefore not be “fundamentally altered”.

It is the DSP’s responsibility to investigate whether the requested accommodations are standard or if they constitute a fundamental alteration to a medical program. If faculty and the DSP are unable to reach a consensus, then an outside objective expert may be consulted.



Navigating Denial of Accommodations

When determining whether or not an accommodation would constitute a fundamental alteration of a course, there are several steps the institution must take to make this determination. **They cannot simply deny your request without any investigation.** However, many times schools will simply cite their technical standards, so it is important to be familiar with your school's technical standards.

Factors to be considered in determining whether a standard is essential include:

- The nature and purpose of the program
- The relationship of the standard to the functional elements of the program
- Whether the standard is required in similar programs in other institutions
- Whether the standard is essential to a given vocation for which the program is preparing students
- Whether the standard is required for licensure or certification in a related occupation or professions
- Whether or not there are alternative modification that could accommodate the student without fundamentally altering the course



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Despite the protections, laws, and systems in place to provide equitable access to education for medical students, students may encounter difficulties throughout the accommodations process and subsequent discrimination based on their disability. Such scenarios might include:

- Undue delays
- Denial
- Incorrect or ineffective implementation of accommodations

Students may also experience wrongful dismissal or rescinding of their acceptance offers because of schools' inability to meet accommodation needs and subsequent noncompliance with technical standards. This section aims to provide a general overview of resources to support students who encounter such barriers and equip them with tools to advocate for themselves and their accommodation needs. This resource is intended to be a general guide, not an exhaustive list, individualized guidance, or legal advice. We recommend you consult a lawyer at any point in this process for individualized legal advice.



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

In addition to a private lawyer, another option for legal support is the federally mandated Protection and Advocacy (P&A) Systems and Client Assistance Programs (CAP). They exist nationwide to provide free legal advice and advocacy support for disability and accommodations concerns. The [National Disability Rights Network](#) has a complete list of the agencies for each state, U.S. territory, and the Native American community in the Four Corners area.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) are federal laws that protect the rights of individuals with disabilities. These laws define individuals with disability as “persons with a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities,” including individuals who have a record of or are perceived to have such an impairment. Examples of major life activities include:

- Self-care
- Working
- Learning



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

The ADA protects individuals with disabilities from discrimination based on their disability and protects disabled individuals' rights to equal access to opportunities within all aspects of public life.

Section 504 specifically protects disabled individuals from discrimination on account of their disability within any institution receiving federal funds, including hospitals and universities. Both laws mandate that qualifying institutions, including medical schools and hospitals, provide reasonable accommodations for equal opportunities for participation in learning. The only exception is if the accommodations “fundamentally alter the nature of the service, program, or activity or give rise to an undue financial or administrative burden”.



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law that protects learners with disabilities' confidentiality regarding disability disclosure within any federally funded institution.

Under FERPA, disability and accommodation information must be stored separately from students' academic records, and institutions can only release disability-related information with prior consent from the student, with the exception that information can be released to a University official if they have "legitimate educational interest to fulfill a professional responsibility." The previously stated protections continue to be in place in the United States, and institutions must abide by these laws.



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

According to the ADA and Section 504, all public or federally funded medical schools are required to have a process for accommodations. Most institutions have a dedicated disability service provider (DSP) and/or disability resource office that supports and administers disability-related supports and accommodations. Suppose you cannot find the appropriate contact information and process information in the student handbook or on your university's website. In that case, you can also consider contacting a trusted dean, faculty member, or advisor for further information on the appropriate professional.

For more information on accommodations in undergraduate medical education, please reference the Job Accommodation Networks' "A to Z of Disabilities and Accommodations," which provides guidance on reasonable accommodations in compliance with the ADA based on disability, limitation type, and work-related function.



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Resources on an Institutional Level

The following section includes general advice regarding navigating the process for disabilities and accommodations at your university. Each institution has its policies, but there are some basic standards that all universities must follow. To see your institution's policies regarding disabilities and accommodations, check the student handbook for a section on disability and accommodations. Some universities may have more information in this section than others, but it is a good starting point if you are unsure of the process at your university. If you cannot find your institution's student handbook or its policies on the university's website, you can also consider contacting a trusted dean, faculty member, or advisor for further information.



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Resources on an Institutional Level

What are some ways that I can protect myself during the accommodations process?

1. Keep all documentation, email communications, etc., related to your accommodations request.
 - a. If you encounter difficulties with your accommodations in the future, you will have documented evidence to support your claims.
2. Whenever possible, make sure conversations are documentable.
 - a. If you have a meeting in person or via an audio or video call, follow up on the meeting with an email to that person(s) that summarizes and documents the content of your conversation.
3. Bring an advocate to meetings with you who can provide support throughout the accommodations process.



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Resources on an Institutional Level

Do I have to disclose my disability to my institution?

This depends on whether you will request accommodations from your university.

1. You are not obligated to disclose a disability to your institution. According to the Learning Disabilities Association of America, “There is no standardized form or set of requirements regarding what people must share about their disabilities, and the choice to disclose is a personal decision that individuals with disabilities must make for themselves. They should decide to whom they choose to disclose and how much information to provide.”
 - a. However, if you request accommodations, you must disclose the disability and provide documentation to support your request.
2. You do not have to disclose your disability to individual professors or faculty members. Once a memo containing your approved accommodations is created, it should not include private information, such as your diagnoses or specific medical details.
3. Any staff members working on your accommodations request may not disclose your disability or medical details to any other individuals, per FERPA.



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Resources on an Institutional Level

What if a professor or instructor objects to my accommodations?

1. In most cases, a professor or instructor may not forbid a student from using an approved accommodation or aid. For guidance and clarification, contact the person who helped you complete the accommodations process.
2. A professor or instructor may forbid a student from using an approved accommodation or aid if it would limit the student's participation in the program.
3. Suppose the professor or instructor has specific concerns, such as copyright concerns and the use of recording devices. In that case, the school can work with the professor on creating an agreement to be signed that would allow the student to use their approved auxiliary aid or accommodation. See more information in the Q&A section of the [U.S. Department of Education "Auxiliary Aids and Services for Postsecondary Students with Disabilities."](#)



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Resources on an Institutional Level

Can I request accommodations later if I did not request them during previous academic years?

Yes! If you did not initially request accommodations but decide later on that you may need accommodations, you may request accommodations at any time using the same process as detailed in this guide.

If I do not feel that the accommodations granted by my institution are adequate, can I change my requested accommodations?

1. Yes! If your approved accommodations are not providing the support you need or are ineffective in any way, you can request to alter your accommodations.
2. Reach out as soon as possible to minimize the time you spend without the appropriate accommodations.
3. Your need for accommodations may shift as your expectations and responsibilities in your program change. (e.g., the transition from didactic to clinical years).



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Resources on an Institutional Level

What is a reasonable amount of time for the accommodations process?

1. Unfortunately, there is no specification within the law about what would be considered a reasonable turnaround time for requesting and approving accommodations.
 - a. Ask your institution if they can estimate how long the process will take.
 - b. Check the student handbook to see if the school has a specific policy about the timing of accommodations requests and approvals.
2. Ensure the person handling your accommodations request is aware that delays in implementing your accommodations will impede your ability to perform well in the program and impact the quality of your education compared to your peers.
 - a. After you apply for accommodations, keep track of the exams, quizzes, practicals, or other program requirements you must complete before your accommodations take effect.
3. If you feel that the accommodations process is taking an unreasonable amount of time and is impacting your ability to participate in your program or the university's available activities, check the state and national resource sections below on how to report the issue and seek assistance.



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Resources at a State Level

Unfortunately, there may be situations where you cannot reach a solution within your university. Individual states may have laws regarding disability protections in education and grievance processes for potential rights violations. For example, some states have an office of civil rights that investigates complaints of disability discrimination.

Some steps that you can take to advocate for your rights include:

1. If you feel that you have been discriminated against based on disability, check if your state has a complaint or grievance process as soon as possible.
 - a. There may be a required timeline for you to file a complaint from the date of the potential violation.
2. Methods of filing grievances and complaints vary by state.
 - a. Methods can include filing complaints in person at an agency office, over the phone, or online forms
 - b. Legal experts in your state can help ensure you follow the proper claims process



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Resources at a State Level

3. You may be able to receive free legal assistance through various programs and organizations.
 - a. Consult your state's Protection and Advocacy (P&A) Systems and Client Assistance Programs (CAP) agency.
 - i. The National Disability Rights Network has a database that can be searched by state for legally based advocacy services for people with disabilities.
 - b. Under federal law, P&A agencies have the authority to provide legal representation and other advocacy services to all people with disabilities.
 - c. Using legal assistance can help ensure that you have all of the necessary documents and evidence to support your claim.
4. Reference an example of the complaint process for disability and accessibility claims in California
 - a. This website has details specific to the state of California, but it provides a general overview of the complaint process and some federal resources. Your state may also have a similar resource.



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Resources on the National Level

There are numerous avenues at the federal level to report disability-based discrimination and accommodations concerns at your institution. Importantly, individuals do not need a lawyer to file complaints and requests for an investigation. However, as a reminder, the following is not legal advice, and you should seek out legal counsel (such as via your state or U.S. territory's P&A/CAP agency or another qualified legal agent) for individualized legal advice or assistance at any point throughout this process.



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Resources on the National Level

What should I do if my school or institution is not appropriately providing me with a needed accommodation?

In this case, there are two different options for filing a complaint:

1. Via the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, which investigates complaints about discrimination on the basis of disability (in addition to race, color, national origin, age, or sex)
 - a. This report must be filed within 180 days of the act of discrimination
 - b. If there is an internal investigation within your institution regarding the same issue, this report must be filed within 60 days of the internal investigation's completion
2. Through the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division, which investigates civil rights law violations, including denial of accommodations
 - a. There is no time limit on when the report must be filed
 - b. This office also covers complaints regarding private institutions/businesses that do not receive public funds



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Resources on the National Level

What steps can I take if I believe my institution has violated my right to privacy and confidentiality regarding my disability or health information?

There are two options for filing a grievance based on your unique situation:

1. If you believe that your school or institution has violated your right to privacy of your disability as protected under FERPA you can file a grievance with the **U.S. Department of Education's Student Privacy Policy Office**
2. If you believe that your institution or its administrators have inappropriately used your medical information, you can file a complaint with the **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office for Civil Rights** (select option 3 - Violation of Privacy or Security of Health Information (HIPAA))



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Resources on the National Level

I believe I have been wrongfully dismissed from my institution on account of my disability or my acceptance was rescinded because my institution claimed they could not accommodate me and I could not meet their technical standards. What can I do next?

One step you can take is to file a complaint with the [U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division](#). As a reminder, you can also consult your state or U.S. territory's [P&A/CAP agency](#) for free legal advice or another qualified legal agent for individualized legal advice or assistance at any point throughout this process.



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Resources on the National Level

What should be included in a complaint related to disability discrimination and accommodations?

While each complaint or grievance filed is unique, here is an example of a recent complaint filed with the U.S. Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division by a medical student on account of “disability-based discrimination and failure to accommodate, in violation of Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.” The Docs with Disabilities Initiative has also compiled a collection of legal cases, complaints, and other resources (scroll down to “Technical Standards-Publications”) related to technical standards and unlawful dismissal from institutions on account of disability status and accommodations.



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Resources on the National Level

For more information on your rights and resources:

1. National Disability Rights Network - *provides general disability rights and law information for many domains of public life, including education and employment*
2. Bazon Center For Mental Health Law - *provides specific information and resources on rights and laws related to mental health and psychiatric disability*
3. Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) “Disability and Accessibility in Academic Medicine” Resource Page - *provides a collection of resources related to disability and accessibility in medical education and healthcare*
4. Docs with Disabilities Initiative - *provides information on disability, accommodations, and technical standards for disabled learners and professionals in health careers and resources specific to accommodations and technical standards in various settings.*



Addressing Disability-Based Discrimination in Medical School

Conclusions

Overall, this section is intended to provide general advice and initial next steps for you to advocate for yourself in the setting of disability-based discrimination. Each person's circumstances are unique, and this guidance may not be entirely applicable to or all-encompassing of your unique situation. We encourage you to continue advocating for yourself and your rights, seek legal advice as needed, and lean on your community's support.

If you want to be more involved in disability advocacy efforts and connect with other students going through similar experiences, join the MSDCI community!

Sign up for the [MSDCI national email list](#)

Check out the [MSDCI website](#)



Additional Resources

Email Examples

As soon as possible after admission or arrival to medical schools, reach out to your DSP, disability services office, or Student Dean about accommodations. This process may look different depending on your school and/or where you are in your training. You may not, in fact, need to send an introductory email if your school allows virtual scheduling.

If you do need to reach out, there are a few key points that are generally wise to keep in mind when communicating with your DSP and faculty preceptors.

Keep your communications short and succinct

Understand that anything you write in an email can be shared (even though it shouldn't be) or may be a matter of public record at certain institutions. For this reason, be mindful of what you choose to include.

If you are concerned about confidentiality, choose a neutral email title that does not disclose the purpose of your email.

Know that you can always request a phone call or in-person meeting to discuss confidential or sensitive information that you would prefer not to include in an email.



Additional Resources

Email Examples

Template for contacting your DSP:

Title: Meeting Request

Hello [Name of DSP],

I'm reaching out to you today to request a meeting to discuss my accessibility needs. I believe that I require accommodations in order to successfully participate in medical school.

Please let me know if there is any further information you need in advance of our meeting.

I am available during the following times: [add in availability within the next 1-2 weeks]. Please let me know which of those times works best for you.

Thank you in advance for your time and assistance.

Sincerely,

[Your name], M[#]



Additional Resources

Email Examples

There are several reasons why you may feel it necessary to contact your faculty preceptors about accommodations:

- To inform them that you have accommodations
- To inform them of a need to utilize your accommodations
- To inform them of an issue in the academic environment that is affecting your current accommodations

Your school may or may not inform your professors and preceptors about students with accommodations. If your school does this for you, you may not need to inform them yourself unless you want to. **If your accommodations are not provided by certain faculty in a timely or effective manner, contact your DSP immediately about the issue.**

One important thing to remember is that there is no point in this process in which any of your professors or preceptors can require you to disclose the reasons for your accommodations or ask you for any medical documentation.



Additional Resources

Email Examples

Template for contacting professors/preceptors notifying them of your accommodations:

Title: Meeting request

Hello Dr. [insert name here],

I will be a student/I am a student in [name of class], and I have disability* accommodations for the class. I would like to discuss my accommodations with you [in advance of class starting]. Here is my availability in the upcoming week: [add in availability within the next week]. Please let me know what time works best for you.

Thank you, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

[Name], M[#]

*You do not need to specify what type of disability you have, nor do you need to specify disability accommodations. You can simply say “accommodations” in the correspondence.



Additional Resources

Email Examples

Template for contacting professors/preceptors notifying them of a need to use your accommodations:

Note: This has been written using the example of a disability-related absence. It can be modified for other uses of accommodations.

Title: Urgent absence request

Hello Dr. [insert name here],

I am writing to let you know that I am [not feeling well/flaring/having a migraine/etc.]. I will not be able to attend [class/lab/etc.] today. This absence is in accordance with my [disability] accommodations*, and I will make up the missed work when I'm feeling better.

Thank you for your understanding.

Sincerely,

[Name], M[#]

*If this professor is already familiar with your accommodations and knows you well, you do not need to include this.



Tips for Self-Advocacy

These tips, written by Nora Newcomb, represent advice that has worked well for her but may not work well for everyone.

Know your rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act. We highlighted some of those rights in the sections that say “Know Your Rights”. Check out articles and books written by Dr. Lisa Meeks, one of the foremost experts on accommodations for students in the health sciences, to better understand your rights and what accommodations are available to you.

If and when issues with your accommodations arise, know who you can go to for assistance such as your DSP or trusted faculty member and involve them sooner rather than later.

Standup for yourself. Do not tolerate ableism. Equal access and opportunity for students with disabilities is protected under federal law. Receiving accommodations in a timely and effective manner is your right as a learner, a physician-in-training, and most importantly a human being.

Practice important conversations before you have them so that you can anticipate potential pitfalls. Request questions in advance so that you can be prepared.

Find a disability community (which you’ve probably already done if you are reading this guide!). MSDCI is a great resource for support and counsel.



Resources

- Future Docs with Disabilities

@Disabled_Docs on Twitter/X → sign up to be paired with a physician mentor based on interests!

- Association of Medical Professionals with Hearing Losses

<https://www.amphl.org/>

- Medical Students with Disability and Chronic Illness (MSDCI)

www.msdc.org

- Disability Advocacy Coalition in Medicine (DAC Med)

<https://www.feinberg.northwestern.edu/diversity/affinity-groups/dac-med.html>

- The Alliance for Disability in Health Care Education

<https://www.adhce.org/>



Further Reading

- Disability as Diversity: A Guidebook for Inclusion in Medicine, Nursing, and the Health Professions. Lisa M. Meeks & Leslie Neal-Boyland. 2020. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-46187-4>
- Equal Access for Students with Disabilities: The Guide for Health Science and Professional Education. Lisa M. Meeks, Neera R. Jaine, & Elisa P. Laird. 2020. <https://www.springerpub.com/equal-access-for-students-with-disabilities-9780826182227.html>
- Check out the 'Resources' tab on MSDCI's website: <https://msdci.org/resources/>





MEDICAL STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY AND CHRONIC ILLNESS

Community. Advocacy. Education. Accessibility.

Website: www.msdc.org

Email: msdcinational@gmail.com

Instagram: @msdc_national

Twitter: @MSDCInational

GroupMe: https://groupme.com/join_group/66663425/DTuMC3WW