


FINDING THE PERFECT COLLEGE

Ultimate Guide for Blind & Visually Impaired College Students

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Earning a college degree is challenging in itself, and there are even more obstacles for students who have visual impairments. When your vision is impaired, class materials are more difficult to access, navigating through campus takes more than just a map, visual social cues are missed, and most importantly, getting support from your college will likely be crucial to your success.

This guide offers a complete walkthrough to help blind and visually impaired students navigate their college experience. You'll find a list of the things to consider when choosing a college, information on financial aid for students with disabilities, and the top schools for students with visual impairments, among other helpful information and advice.

Top Colleges for Students with Visual Disabilities

Now here's where we've done some homework for you. Many states across the country have schools specially designed for students with visual impairments, or where special accommodations are guaranteed. In Florida for example, there is the Florida School for the Deaf & the Blind, and in California, you'll find the California School for the Blind. Google "school for the blind in *your state*" and you'll probably find one there.

However, you don't have to attend a special school for the blind to access accommodations for your visual impairment. Plenty of traditional colleges and universities are more than well-equipped to support you. The following 10 traditional institutions offer some of the top accommodations in the country for students with visual disabilities:





| Rank | University/College | Location |
|------|---------------------------|----------------|
| 1 | Missouri State University | Springfield/MO |
| 2 | University of Connecticut | Storrs/CT |

| | | |
|----|---------------------------------------|---------------|
| 3 | Mississippi State University | Starkville/MS |
| 4 | University of Michigan-Ann Arbor | Ann Arbor/MI |
| 5 | University of Arizona | Tucson/AZ |
| 6 | Texas Tech University | Lubbock/TX |
| 7 | College of Charleston | Charleston/SC |
| 8 | University of Wisconsin-Whitewater | Whitewater/WI |
| 9 | California State University-Fullerton | Fullerton/CA |
| 10 | Alfred University | Alfred/NY |

1. Missouri State University



Missouri State University by Keith8404 ©

🔗 [Missouri State University](#) in Springfield is a public university that makes sure all its students (including about 14,000 undergrads) can feel involved in the campus community. Known for having an outstanding Greek life and a large number of student organizations, the university uniquely has a Delta Alpha Pi Honor Society for students with disabilities who shine academically. The College of Humanities and Public Affairs also has a minor in Disability Studies, while the Department of Counseling, Leadership and Special Education offers a Master's in Blindness and Low Vision.

- Campus Size: Small (225 acres)



- Student/Faculty Ratio: 20:1
- Transportation: Bear Line Shuttle (on-campus, free)

Not many schools can say they have a disability services office quite as great as the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at Missouri State. For example, the DRC maintains a blog to keep its members informed about relevant news and events, such as “Sidewalk Closings From February 26th until October 7th.” Furthermore, the Access Technology Center (ATC) makes it easy for students to find the assistive equipment and software they need to succeed in their classes.

In addition to the DRC, Missouri State supports students with visual impairments through the TRIO Student Support Services program. TRIO is an academic support program exclusive to qualified students, such as those who have a disability or low income. Accepted students are offered a wide array of services, including tutoring, advising, personal assistance, and career exploration, to help them succeed both inside and outside of the classroom.

2. University of Connecticut



Commonly known as UConn, the [University of Connecticut](#) is located in the small village of Storrs and has made a big name for itself in research. The university was ranked in 2017’s U.S. News & World Report as one the top 20 public schools in the nation, and as long ago as 1999, it was already listed by New Mobility Magazine as one of the top ten most disabled-friendly colleges. UConn serves about 18,000 undergrads, and is especially popular with business and health majors.



- Campus Size: Large (4,200 acres)
- Student/Faculty Ratio: 16:1
- Transportation: University Transportation Services (on-campus and off-campus, free), Accessible Van Service (on-campus, free)

The University of Connecticut has long been known as having one of the most accessible college campuses in the country. Its Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) has been working since 1967 (originally as the Program for the Physically Handicapped) to modify any areas of campus that aren't fully accessible to students with disabilities.

Today, the CSD operates out of a state-of-the-art 12-room facility and helps more than 1,100 students with disabilities such as visual impairments. A large staff of more than 200 employees (including students) all collaborate to make UConn an outstanding model for making higher education institutions accessible. With all this manpower, the CSD offers a huge array of services that you can't find at just any university.

Take the Husky GPS program for example. Through this online summer program (\$1,500), incoming students with disabilities at UConn are given the opportunity to create personalized plans for getting the support they need. Students are introduced to assistive technologies and other resources they might use at the university. Particularly beneficial for students with visual impairments, the program also offers help with navigation of the university's physical campus.

3. Mississippi State University



As a public research university in the rural South, [MSU](#) offers students big-time opportunities and a small-town feel. The school is located in the city of Starkville, Mississippi, about 170 miles southeast of Memphis, TN. It has about 17,000 undergraduate students enrolled and offers top programs in engineering and education.

- Campus Size: Large (4,200 acres)
- Student/Faculty Ratio: 19:1
- Transportation: MSU Shuttle Service (on-campus, free); Starkville-MSU Area Rapid Transit – S.M.A.R.T. (off-campus, free)

MSU stands out as a top school for visually impaired students partly because the university is home to the National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision (NRTC). The NRTC is “focused on employment outcomes of persons with blindness or low vision,” according to the Center’s website, and helps visually impaired students succeed beyond their college years. Services include an Online Employment Preparation Program designed for blind users, which offers a growing list of people with visual impairments who have built successful careers and who are available to talk with current students.

Furthermore, the Office of Disability Support Services at MSU not only assists students with standard accommodations, it also helps students get involved with United Students, an organization of students that focuses on providing support to students with disabilities.

4. University of Michigan-Ann Arbor





Located less than an hour away from Detroit, the [UM](#) University of Michigan's main campus in Ann Arbor is a public university in a city environment. Along with the university's exceptional transportation options, its location makes it easy for students with visual impairments to enjoy all that the city has to offer without making an arduous trek. The school has about 27,000 undergraduate students, many of whom choose to major in business, psychology, or political science.

- Campus Size: Large (3,200 acres)
- Student/Faculty Ratio: 15:1
- Transportation: Paratransit (on-campus and off-campus, free), University Transit System (on-campus and off-campus, free); AAATA Fixed-Route Bus Service (off-campus, free)

Founded in 1973, the campus's Office of Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) has become known as a global advocate for college students with disabilities. As a result, the office has served as a model for other universities who have endeavored to fully support the success of students with disabilities. The University of Michigan's free services include (but are definitely not limited to) the HathiTrust Digital Library, which "14 million digital books will soon be made available to blind and print-disabled users."

The SSD also has a Student Advisory Board made up of students registered with the SSD who advocate for the office and all its members (about 2,200 students). Similarly, the school has a Council



for Disability Concerns (CFDC) that handles concerns regarding students with disabilities. According to the office's 2015/2016 annual report, blind and visually impaired students most often take advantage of the school's service for scanning books and providing braille materials.

Other services/resources include Service Dog Central, which provides various information about service dogs; the James Edward Knox Center Adaptive Technology Computing Site (Knox Center), which is a computer lab designed for students with disabilities; the Initiative on Disability Studies, which promotes educational programs focused on disabilities; and the Office for Institutional Equity, which promotes equal opportunities for all students.

5. University of Arizona-Tucson



University of Arizona by Huperphuff ©

Great for students who are interested in research, the [University of Arizona](#) is a top-ranked public research university located in the heart of the desert city of Tucson. Popular with business and biology majors, the school has a large student population with approximately 33,000 undergrads. The College of Education's Department of Disability and Psychoeducational Studies at the university has a graduate program with a specialization in visual impairment for students who want to become TVIs (Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments). That means students with visual impairments have access to experts in their own educational challenges right on campus.

- Campus Size: Small (392 acres)



- Student/Faculty Ratio: 23:1
- Transportation: Daytime Disability Cart Service (on-campus, free); Nearby Buses/Shuttles (off-campus, free and paid)

The Disability Resources Center (DRC) at the University of Arizona makes it simple for students with visual impairments to request and receive the support and accommodations they need. The DRC provides a special orientation for all students, as well as an “Access Consultant” to help students with disabilities identify the accommodations they personally need, such as document conversion. The university also uniquely provides an on-campus Daytime Disability Cart Service that helps students with disabilities get around.

Furthermore, the second-floor lounge of the DRC building has an assistive technology lab outfitted with computers set up with assistive technology, study tables, and scanners. The university has a long list of assistive technologies available. Finally, an entire section of the university’s website (itAccessibility) is dedicated to “achieving full accessibility of all electronic and information technology.”

6. Texas Tech University



Texas Tech University by Kimberly Vardeman ©

As one of the country’s top public research institutions, [Texas Tech University](#) is located in the West Texas city of Lubbock, known to the locals as “Hub City” for being the region’s economic, education, and healthcare hub. Texas Tech is well-recognized for its research projects in epidemiology, computing, atmospheric sciences, wind energy, and other scientific areas of study. The school also has a Center for Research and Education in Sensory Disabilities (The Virginia Murray

Sowell Center), which “promotes quality research to address the academic and social needs of school-age students with visual impairments and provides public service to assist local, national and international constituencies.”

- Campus Size: Large (1,839 acres)
- Student/Faculty Ratio: 22:1
- Transportation: Lubbock’s Citibus & Night Shuttle (on-campus and off-campus, free)

If you want to be sure you’re not alone in needing special accommodations at your school, Texas Tech is one to consider. The university’s outstanding Student Disability Services (SDS) has about 2,000 registered students, and all those students chose Texas Tech for good reason. The SDS department is one of the best in the nation, offering unique programs such as free “drop-in tutoring” for help anytime on any academic subject, as well as special RaiderReady courses “designed to help students develop college readiness skills for the academic classroom, and...to meet the specific needs of various disability populations.”

7. College of Charleston



College of Charleston by Anthony ©

Founded in 1770, before the Revolutionary War, the [College of Charleston](#) in South Carolina is rich with history and tradition. Popular with business and communications majors, this mid-sized public university has about 10,000 undergraduate students in attendance. It’s located right in downtown [^](#)

Charleston, making urban life exceptionally accessible via nearby transportation services, perfect for students with visual impairments.

- Campus Size: Medium (4,200 acres)
- Student/Faculty Ratio: 15:1
- Transportation: Nearby Transit Service – CARTA Bus & DASH Shuttle (off-campus, free)

Visually impaired students will find that the College of Charleston is serious about making the school accessible to all students. The school specifically focuses on encouraging professors and other staff to incorporate the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into their students' educational environments. The Center for Disability Services (CDS) also has one of the best websites for browsing information on services provided, including a section dedicated to Web Accessibility for students.

Visually impaired students are further assisted by the CDS through its SNAP (Students Needing Access Parity) program. SNAP endeavors to make sure every registered student with a disability receives special advising, personalized accommodations including assistive technology, and alternative courses if necessary. More than 900 students at the College of Charleston are members of SNAP.

Together, CDS and SNAP regularly hold events for members, such as study nights and midterm recovery get-togethers. This is especially helpful to students with visual disabilities who are looking for an easy way to socialize and network with their peers. The CDS even organizes Disability Awareness Day.

8. University of Wisconsin-Whitewater





About 50 miles west of Milwaukee, the [University of Wisconsin-Whitewater](#) is a public university within the University of Wisconsin System. Especially popular with finance and accounting as well as liberal arts and social work majors, the school has a population of about 10,000 undergraduate students. Aside from the school's impressive Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD), students with visual impairments may find UW-Whitewater's James R. Conner University Center appealing for its buzzing social atmosphere, dining venues, coffee shops, and live music.

- Campus Size: Small (400 acres)
- Student/Faculty Ratio: 21:1
- Transportation: Weekend Bus Services (off-campus, paid)

The CSD at UW-Whitewater has been providing comprehensive support services since 1972. One of the most notable programs organized by the CSD is the annual Opening Horizons Conference, scheduled for 2017 on May 5. Designed for high school students with disabilities, the conference invites future college students (as well as parents, teachers, etc.) to come and “explore the many aspects related to the post-secondary setting for students with disabilities.” The conference is free to attend with pre-registration.

UW-Whitewater also has an Adaptive Computer Lab for use by registered students with disabilities. Computers are set up with assistive technology software, while the lab also provides braille printing and specialized keyboards, just to name a few of the assistive devices available. Staff are present to help anyone in the lab.



9. California State University, Fullerton (CSUF)



California State University–Fullerton by Jack Miller ©

Known as [Cal State Fullerton](#) or CSUF, this small-sized public research university sits only 25 miles away from Los Angeles in sunny California. The school has roughly 33,000 undergraduates, giving it the second-largest student population in the California State University (CSU) system. Unique to itself, however, is the university’s pledged commitment to “diversity, equity, and inclusion.” Every minority at CSUF, including students with visual impairments and other disabilities, is deeply considered in the school’s goal “to transform into a national model of equity and inclusion.”

- Campus Size: Small (236 acres)
- Student/Faculty Ratio: 25:1
- Transportation: Nearby Train/Bus Stations (off-campus, paid); Carpool Partner Service

As part of the CSU system, Cal State Fullerton is expected to adhere to the CSU’s Accessible Technology Initiative (ATI), but this CSU goes above and beyond. The ATI page on the school’s website hints at how accommodating this school aims to be for students with disabilities.

Disability Support Services (DSS) at CSUF offer more than your standard request forms and advising. The Abled Advocators program, for example, helps the school maintain a community that regularly meets to raise disability awareness on campus, organize social and professional events, and make sure students with disabilities experience the concept of inclusion that CSUF is so dedicated to. Students also have access to workshops, advising, a peer mentor program, counseling, and much more.



10. Alfred University



Located southeast of Buffalo, the small private [📍 Alfred University](#) in the rural Village of Alfred, NY is small indeed with a campus of only 232 acres and about 2,000 undergrad students. It's perfect for visually impaired students who want to avoid the challenge of navigating an enormous university campus. Despite its small stature, the school offers a wide selection of more than 60 majors and concentrations, including top programs in the arts (particularly ceramics) and engineering.

- Campus Size: Small (232 acres)
- Student/Faculty Ratio: 12:1
- Transportation: Hornell Area Transit (off-campus, free to the Walmart/Wegmans Plaza in Hornell); Nearby Bus/Train (off-campus, paid)

In addition to its small campus size, Alfred University stands out as a great school for visually impaired students due to its Center for Academic Success (CAS). As the core of the school's Services for Students with Disabilities, CAS gets ahead of your college success by giving every student a CAS registration form during the admissions process, allowing visually impaired students to report their needs without any hassle. You can then receive assistance from CAS, such as early orientation, training in self-advocacy, and personalized help from an Academic Consultant. Your consultant will help you create a plan unique to your needs, identifying the accommodations and services that you will need to succeed while attending Alfred.

First, Let's Talk Terminology...



Before we go any further, let's review the three different degrees of blindness to make sure we're speaking the same lingo. Most people whose vision is impaired fall under one of three major degrees of blindness, listed below from the lowest level of impairment to the highest:

1. Visual impairment

For the purposes of this guide, a visual impairment will refer to any type of vision loss. However, when speaking technically about a person's degree of blindness, "visual impairment" means something more specific.

Also referred to as "low vision," this is the most basic level of serious vision loss, meaning you have a corrected visual acuity of 20/70 or less in the better eye. More practically, the term "visual impairment" refers to an inhibited ability to see that cannot be helped by simple solutions, such as eyeglasses or contact lenses, or even corrective surgery.

As such, a visual impairment causes everyday challenges with sight. For example, low vision students usually have difficulty seeing classroom boards (chalkboards, whiteboards, etc.), but may be able to read close print materials, such as books and worksheets, either with or without aides.

2. Legal blindness

This means you may still be able to see (perceive light), but your vision is poor enough that you need visual solutions similar to those needed by people with "total blindness." Also, according to the [American Foundation for the Blind](#), "Legal blindness is a level of vision loss that has been legally defined to determine eligibility for benefits. The clinical diagnosis refers to a central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with the best possible correction, and/or a visual field of 20 degrees or less."

Students who are legally blind usually experience extreme limitations when viewing classroom visuals, reading texts, and seeing other educational presentations. They also have trouble participating in hands-on activities and navigating their way through the college campus.

3. Total blindness

That means you can't see anything at all (no light) with either eye. The condition may be recorded by doctors as "NLP" or "no light perception." Students with total blindness experience the same challenges as those who are legally blind, as well as challenges that arise from not being able to perceive any light, such as seeing the difference between night and day.

Because your needs will be unique to your own degree of blindness, it may be helpful for you to have this basic terminology at the forefront of your mind when talking to people on campus.

As a student with a visual impairment, your rights to equal opportunities and accommodations on-campus in the United States are protected by two pieces of legislation:

- 1 The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- 2 Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

Together, these two laws require academic institutions (public and private) who receive federal funding (most of them do) to support students who have all kinds of different disabilities by offering accessible facilities and alternative materials or assistive technologies. The catch is that these laws are somewhat vague, leaving schools open to interpret them as they wish. While one university might only do the bare minimum, another might go above and beyond to really invest in supporting students with disabilities.

In addition to these two federal protections, visually impaired students and students with other disabilities may be eligible for state-level grants through the Assistive Technology Act (also known as the Tech Act). Grants are awarded to help students buy assistive devices, such as screen readers or enlarging software.

How Do Colleges Support Visually Impaired Students?

Accommodations for visually impaired students are typically provided through the college's office of disability services. When you first enroll in college (or before you even apply), be sure to visit this office and explore the options available to you. Common accommodations include:

- Enhanced-font presentations
- Course materials and exams in alternative formats (Braille)
- Additional time to complete assignments/exams
- Assistance with note-taking, reading, etc.
- Permission to record class lectures or provided recordings

Aside from these accommodations, many college campuses also incorporate [Universal Design of Learning \(UDL\)](#) into their educational environments. Recommended by academic experts, UDL helps ensure inclusion for students with disabilities in classroom settings.

What Technologies Can Help Visually Impaired Students?

In addition to standard accommodations provided by colleges for visually impaired students, you will also ideally have access to a wide range of assistive technology/devices through the school's on-campus assistive technology center (assuming there is one). When it comes to education, these assistive technologies will prove most useful:



Assistive Devices

- **Screen readers:** These devices help visually impaired students read text on a computer by either reading on-screen text aloud or recreating the text using a refreshable braille display. In order to use a screen reader during college, your texts will need to be compatible with screen reader technology.
- **Refreshable braille displays:** Braille displays are used with screen reader software. The electronic device connects to your computer and sits in front of your keyboard for you to feel with your hands as it recreates the on-screen text using “cells” that rise and fall.
- **Speech-to-text word processors:** By allowing you to dictate aloud what you want to type, this type of software helps students do everything from writing emails to professors to participating in online message boards.
- **Braille printers:** Although braille printers may not be common at college campuses, you may get lucky and be looking at a school that does have one, allowing both you and your professors to print any braille materials you need.

Computer Software

- **NVDA Screen Reader:** Adds a speech synthesizer and braille display support to your Microsoft Windows PC. Can run off a USB drive without PC installation. Free and open-source.
- **VoiceOver:** Provides audio descriptions of on-screen elements. Built into Apple computers, iPhones, and iPads. Supports refreshable braille displays.
- **Dragon Speech Recognition Software:** Powerful speech recognition computer program for Windows. Enables voice commands to direct the computer. Also provides speech-to-text input. Various versions are available at various costs.
- **ZoomText:** Magnifies and reads aloud selected text on-screen, for either Mac or Windows computers. Works with peripherals, such as ImageReader, large-print keyboards, and the ZoomText Camera for use with print materials.

Mobile Apps

- **“TapTapSee”** for iOS and Android: Identifies objects by recognizing any object in front of the device’s camera and speaking aloud the name of the object. Free.
- **“Color ID Free”** for iOS and Android: Uses the device’s camera to identify and read aloud the color detected. Helpful for people with color blindness. Free.
- **“KNFB Reader”** for iOS and Android: Powerful text-to-speech app reads aloud any text in front of the device’s camera. Highly accurate. Costs \$99.99.



What About Grants and Scholarships for the Blind?

We have good news! Many grants and scholarships are available to people with varying degrees of blindness. They are either open to anyone with a disability that impacts their access to education or specifically only to people with visual impairments. And even better – as grants and scholarships, these awards do not need to be paid back. It's also important to know that these awards are almost always offered based on academic ability, not on the student's disability.

Grants are typically offered by the state according to need. By talking to a rehabilitation counselor and/or student disability services at your college of choice, you can find out which grants may be available to you.

To help you get a jumpstart on your search, here is a brief list of the top sponsors of scholarship opportunities for college students with visual impairments.

[American Action Fund for Blind Children and Adults](#)

- Application Deadline: Late March
- Amount: \$12,000
- Eligibility: Full-time college student; legally blind; "exemplifies the fruits of Dr. Jernigan's teachings."

[American Council of the Blind \(ACB\)](#)

- Application Deadline: Early March
- Amount: \$1,000 to \$4,000
- Eligibility: Full-time college student involved in school/local community; legally blind in both eyes; minimum 3.3 GPA.

[American Foundation for the Blind \(AFB\)](#)

The Rudolph Dillman Memorial Scholarship

- Application Deadline: Early April
- Amount: \$2,500
- Eligibility: Legally blind; "studying full-time in the field of rehabilitation or education of persons who are blind and/or visually impaired;" letters of recommendation and essay.

The Karen D. Carsel Memorial Scholarship

- Application Deadline: Early April



- Amount: \$3,500
- Eligibility: Legally blind; female undergraduate student studying music; music performance in a digital audio format; letters of recommendation and essay.

The Paul and Ellen Ruckes Scholarship

- Application Deadline: Early April
- Amount: \$2,000
- Eligibility: Legally blind; full-time undergraduate or graduate student in the field of engineering or in computer, physical, or life sciences; letters of recommendation and essay.

[🔗 Blinded Veterans Association \(BVA\)](#)

Thomas H. Miller Scholarship Program

- Application Deadline: Mid April
- Amount: \$1,000
- Eligibility: Full-time college student (especially in music or fine arts); spouse, dependent child, or grandchild of a blinded veteran.

Kathern F. Gruber Scholarship Program

- Application Deadline: Mid April
- Amount: \$2,000
- Eligibility: Full-time college student; spouse, dependent child, or grandchild of a blinded veteran.

[🔗 Chicago Lighthouse Scholarship Program](#)

- Application Deadline: Late March
- Amount: \$1,000 to \$5,000
- Eligibility: Visually impaired, legally blind, totally blind or any of these with an additional disability; full-time college student; letters of recommendation and essay; transcripts; financial statement of need.

[🔗 Council of Citizens with Low Vision International](#)

The Fred Scheigert Scholarship Program

- Application Deadline: Early March
- Amount: \$3,000



- Eligibility: Full-time college student; minimum 3.2 GPA; “low vision from 20/70 in the better eye with best possible correction, or a field restricted to no greater than 30 degrees and to those who have less vision but are still able to benefit from the use of low vision devices to perform daily visual tasks.”

The Lighthouse Guild

The College Bound Scholarship

- Application Deadline: Late March
- Amount: Up to \$10,000
- Eligibility: Legally blind in both eyes; planning to attend college as freshman in the upcoming academic year; letters of recommendation and personal statements.

The Graduate School Scholarship

- Application Deadline: Late March
- Amount: Up to \$10,000
- Eligibility: Legally blind in both eyes; pursuing any post-baccalaureate degree (Master’s, PhD, MD, JD, MBA, etc.); letters of recommendation and personal statements.

National Federation of the Blind (NFB)

- Application Deadline: Late March
- Amount: \$3,000 to \$12,000
- Eligibility: Full-time college student; legally blind in both eyes.

United States Association of Blind Athletes (USABA)

Arthur E. and Helen Copeland Scholarships

- Application Deadline: Late March
- Amount: \$500
- Eligibility: Full-time college student; legally blind; current USABA member; participation in a USABA event; personal biography; essay.

Can I Get Extra Financial Aid for My Visual Disability?

When applying to college, all students are required to submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®). The FAFSA® is used by the government to calculate each student’s estimated

