

**Mid-Atlantic ADA Center
Podcast: ADA Today – Episode 4
COVID-19-and-College**

Speakers:

Caleb Berkemeier, Host

Annie Tulkin, Featured Guest

>> CALEB BERKEMEIER: Welcome to ADA Today, the podcast of the MidAtlantic ADA Center. My name is Caleb Berkemeier, training specialist for the ADA Center, and in this episode we are talking about COVID-19 and its effect on higher education, specifically regarding the effect on students with disabilities.

My guest today is Annie Tulkin, the founder and director of Accessible College. So, before we get into discussing the issues, Annie, would you like to just introduce yourself and tell us what Accessible College is?

>> ANNIE TULKIN: Yeah. Thanks, Caleb. So, I'm Annie Tulkin. I'm the founder and director of Accessible College. I provide college transition support for students with physical disabilities and health conditions and people usually ask, what does that mean, health conditions? That covers everything from autoimmune disorders to lupus to gastrointestinal issues to mental health conditions and everything in between.

So, I typically work with students who are either in high school, so sophomores, juniors, and seniors in high school who are looking at schools and starting their college search process, and I also work with adults who are considering graduate school and looking at graduate school programs as well.

I work with families, students, and clients nationally, although I am based in Silver Spring, Maryland, and I do everything via video chat.

>> CALEB BERKEMEIER: Okay. Well, thank you, Annie, for that. So, let's jump into the discussion. So, I wanted to talk about different aspects of how COVID-19 is affecting higher education. Why don't we just start with how it might be affecting or will affect things in the classroom.

So, what have you been seeing in terms of accommodations for students who are taking classes? Are there any unique effects that are being felt because of the pandemic?

>> ANNIE TULKIN: Sure. That's a great question. I think a lot of students right now are adjusting to the online setting. For a number of the students that I work with who have health conditions that have flareups, they have actually really liked having access to their classes online. That's been really helpful for them because in the typical college setting, you may have the accommodation for flexibility and attendance but that's usually contingent on the professor you know, approving that and saying that it's okay for you to miss a certain number of classes and make up the work. So, that's always a conversation that students need to have with their professors even if they have that approval from the Disability Support Office for that accommodation.

But in light of COVID-19, with everything moving online, students who have a flareup are able to still access that class content and course material and a lot of universities are even recording lectures so students can watch them at a different time which is super helpful for someone who may have a health condition and maybe if they're having a migraine or if they're having another issue at that time, they can watch it at a later time.

For other students, I would say you know, there are some challenges related to online education. So, if you have a health condition or a disability where it's really challenging for you to be in front of a screen for a long time, it can be really tricky to figure out what is the appropriate accommodation once everything has kind of moved online.

I know that some students have opted to you know, withdraw from classes until they're able to come back and do them in person. I know that other students have worked with their professors to let the professors know that they won't have their camera on but they're still there and they'll be listening with headphones and not staring at the screen during that whole class because it might trigger a neurological issue or a migraine for them if they're in front of the computer for a long period of time.

So, there have been some things like that where students have really had to get creative in thinking through how am I going to make this work. And I

think that a lot of students, all students right now are just kind of feeling a little bit maybe nervous about what the future might bring, what the fall might bring, and also they're just kind of digesting the fact that half of their semester was kind of cut short and you know, and the fact that they have just gotten through that – that half of the semester of all online classes which I think was stressful for a lot of people. And quite frankly, from the professor's standpoint too, it may have changed the way that they were teaching the course.

You know, many professors have not ever taught an online course or you know, or used Zoom before which I think we saw a lot of hiccups in the first few weeks. But now they are trying to rethink and kind of retool how they're doing things.

I think that there were also a number of accessibility challenges for deaf students, hearing impaired students, and blind students and visually impaired students because a lot of the course content wasn't made accessible to them. And so, there have been some significant challenges around that and I know that universities are trying to play catchup and try and figure out how to best accommodate students across the board.

>> CALEB BERKEMEIER: Yeah. I wanted to pick up on one thing that you mentioned that I think is really interesting. So, you know, we might think just on a superficial level that you know, this is just going to be a problem across the board for students who have disabilities, but you mentioned that's not necessarily the case, that for some students, actually, being able to have access to that content remotely is kind of what maybe they were needing all along and the pandemic has kind of made this a necessity now.

That kind of makes me wonder about you know, in the future, as things start to open up but yet, you know, the disease is not – has not gone away, are students going to run into a situation where classes might be held in person again but they may not be able to attend safely because maybe they have an autoimmune disorder and they would really need to still be remote. Is there going to be an issue in the future with hybrid classes and how was this handled in the past?

I mean, I'm assuming that in the past, before the pandemic, professors probably were not all that open to the idea of student not being in class but being in there remotely?

>> ANNIE TULKIN: This is kind of the million-dollar question at the moment, I think. So, to just kind of tackle that in like, two pieces, right? So, in the past, if the student needed – if the student had a condition that had flareups and the student needed to you know, miss class because if they were sick, they weren't able to attend or if they had an autoimmune disorder or another issue where they couldn't come to class, they would get approval from the Disability Support Office to have that flexibility in attendance and then it would be contingent on the student having that conversation with the professor to say, professor, I may miss class every once in a while. Here are the steps that I am going to take to inform you.

The university setting is kind of interesting because the professor might say that you know, everybody in this class gets three absences and they can make up those three absences, but there might be a course where if you're not in person, you actually do miss core content or competencies. This comes up a lot in like nursing programs where the student has to like, demonstrate something, like they have to be able to work with their team or their partners to, you know, show that they know how to put a needle in someone's arm or they need to be able to demonstrate something in order to move to the next piece of the class. And that becomes a little bit more tricky because if you're not in person, you may not be able to show those things if everybody else is in person.

Now, if everybody else is not in person or if there is some portion of the student population who is also not there, I guess that calls into question you know, whether or not everybody absolutely has to be in that classroom to demonstrate that skill or ability.

And I think the other piece of this is that if students – we know that in the fall, a lot of schools are doing kind of this hybrid model of in person and with access to the classes remotely. I think I saw a large – I think it was Notre Dame had a policy that if a student got sick with COVID-19, they could still attend their classes remotely.

It didn't directly – that policy didn't directly talk about students with disabilities who have immune disorders or were immunosuppressed. But

what I've been telling the clients that I work with is to request the ability to have remote access to classes during COVID-19 as an accommodation just as a failsafe for them so that if they find themselves in a situation where they are unable to attend in the classroom, they've already gone through the process to request that accommodation and provided documentation from their healthcare provider to support that request.

So, what I am telling people is to do that now, during the summer, to get that documentation if they don't have it, on file with the Disability Support Office so that they can make that request in the fall should they need it.

>> CALEB BERKEMEIER: Yeah. And another one of those accommodations that I think has been controversial in the past is the flexible deadlines. I know that not all professors, you know, think the same on this, but I know that a lot have been uncomfortable with the idea of allowing a student to you know, have deadlines that don't match up with the way that the course is constructed. But it seems like a lot of that is kind of being undermined, at least at the moment, you know, as things have been upturned.

So, in the future, do you think there is going to be any different approach or attitude about flexible deadlines or do you think that you know, the justifications that maybe people had in the past, you know, against that sort of accommodation will kind of be undermined by what's been happening lately?

>> ANNIE TULKIN: I mean, it's a really interesting question. I think that professors were really giving students a lot of grace and flexibility to just kind of get things in when they were able to this past semester, but I imagine that as things move forward, professors may try to be more rigid just because it creates more structure for their class, right, and it's also probably just easier for them to manage things if they know when to expect these deadlines.

This is why it's super important for students who have the accommodation that allows them to, you know, to hand in things past the deadline, to have that conversation with your professor so you're actually setting up kind of reasonable signposts or milestones so that you can figure out where am I in this process and how do I get, you know, how do I get this – this work in on time in a way that works for all of us, right, so that

they're not just like letting it hang in the wind and go on forever and ever but rather actually communicating with the professor to figure out, you know, when they will be able to hand the work in which can sometimes be tricky. If you have a condition that is kind of ebbing and flowing and maybe you're in and out of the hospital, that can be really challenging for a student to know when they might be well enough to work on that paper. But I think the key here, and it's probably the most challenging piece, is communication.

And I also think that it can be really tricky for students especially because it's exhausting to have to kind of re-advocate for yourself all of the time and to bring up you know, and to keep having to bring up the challenges that you're facing or having to recommunicate this with each of your professors if you're going through a health crisis at that point. A lot of times what I do with students is we work on kind of canned email language so that they have some of the stuff ready to go when they know that they are having a flare up or if they have had to go into the hospital so that they can effectively communicate kind of where they're at and what their needs are and how they plan to move forward.

But I do think that professors are people too and this is something that – I used to work in the Disability Support Office at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and I would often remind students that professors are just people. They have families. They have challenges of their own. They have things going on in their own homes. And if we're – if we're all at home and working from home, you know, they're feeling a lot of the same stresses that we are.

And so, I think it's important to remember that you know, you can ask and you can approach these professors and they are people. Hopefully they will be receptive to students' concerns going forward.

But I do think kind of, Caleb, to get to a little bit more of your question, there will be broader implications, I think, too for how this impacts students in higher ed and also in employment settings.

There have been a lot of – there's been a lot of writing about this, about the fact that people with disabilities have been advocating for some of these quote, unquote “accommodations” now for working from home or for having school from home or for greater flexibility in deadlines and things

like that. So, it'll be interesting to see what – what of these things that have become more normalized now will actually become kind of just a part of how we operate in the future. That's something I'm actually really excited about and interested in.

>> CALEB BERKEMEIER: So, moving outside of the classroom or to campus life, there are a lot of students who have mental health related disabilities that really rely on mental health services that the universities provide. Has there been disruption to that as students have had to move off campus? And going into the future, do you think that these mental health services will be there in a way that will really serve students with mental health issues?

>> ANNIE TULKIN: Sure. So, just to frame this for people who may not really know a ton about campus mental health services, so, each college, each university has a counseling center. The counseling center may see students you know, throughout the year as many times as they want or they may have a cap on the number of times that a student can actually go to the campus counseling center before they are referred to an outside provider.

Usually, it kind of depends on the size of the campus and where they are located and things like that, but if a student is – who has a mental health condition is looking at colleges, they should actually go and contact the counseling center and have a conversation about how many times can I see a counselor in the counseling center before I get referred out just so that they can know that ahead of time.

And it varies. Some schools, they'll see a student, you know, six times. Some schools will see them ten times. Sometimes they'll see them throughout the entire year. So, it just kind of depends. And that is important to know because you know, a student might want more consistency in their mental health services, so they might choose to select an off campus provider before they actually go move to that campus if they are going to be living in a new campus and that can be really helpful to know ahead of time.

And then going back to your other point, like, was there a disruption? Absolutely. I think everybody was in kind of triage mode trying to figure out how they can stay connected with students and also just kind of

acknowledging the fact that some students may not have had great internet connectivity or may not have had quiet or safe spaces back at their homes that they had to go back to. Maybe their parents didn't know they were seeking mental health services on campus. And so, there were some challenges related to that too. How do you continue to serve and support these students when they might be in a place where they are either feeling unsafe or they aren't safe?

So, there were a lot of challenges related to that as well. I think now, most schools have gone to either using video chat feature or they just started doing phone kind of correspondence with their students and finding ways to check in on students. Some schools have even opted to make some connections with telehealth companies so that if more students than they could – than they had capacity for were seeking mental health services or just general health services, they have contracts with other kind of outside providers that the students can access via telehealth which I see a lot more schools doing now because quite frankly, we know that many campus health – many campus counseling centers don't have the capacity to serve the number of students on campus who need that support.

And so, they've been turning to telehealth or outside providers for that support for students with mental health conditions on campus.

So, that's kind of been a tide that has been slowly shifting and I think the introduction of the telehealth stuff into colleges is kind of where many more colleges are going to be able to, you know, to be able to actually serve and meet the needs of their student populations. So, that's been kind of an interesting change too. I think we've seen that, you know, outside of universities as well with COVID-19. We're seeing more doctors turning to telehealth or turning to kind of virtual conversations with their patients too.

For many of us, I think that's been like, really lovely because then you don't have to travel to the doctor's office. You can have a conversation about the symptoms that you're experiencing or the things that you need and so, I think for a lot of people, they have really liked that.

You know, obviously there are some things that you might need to be in person for, but telehealth I think has a bright future.

>> CALEB BERKEMEIER: Yeah. It's another interesting example of how things don't necessarily have to be bad just because they're changing as long as they're being done well. Maybe it could actually be a good change.

I'm also curious about other changes to campus life that might happen due to new practices having to be put in place. One thing that springs to mind is I would assume that as campuses open up again, there are going to be rules about wearing masks or some kind of face coverings as students move about the campus in different spaces and maybe even in classrooms themselves.

How will students who might not be able to wear a mask or face covering for a disability related reason going to navigate that issue?

>> ANNIE TULKIN: You are asking all of the hard questions. I think probably right now, the University Council's Office and the Disability Support Office is poring over this exact question to look to see if anybody has figured this out yet.

I imagine that students who, you know, can't wear a mask because of a health condition and just you know, so folks know, that could be any health condition. It could be asthma or COPD, anything that – maybe they're claustrophobic or they have other just kind of breathing challenges in general. And so, wearing a mask might not actually be a possibility for them.

And so, I think at that point, it becomes that conversation with the Disability Support Office and going through that interactive process to see do they want to still be a part of in person classes? You know, they may not want to be. They may have other health conditions too that might, you know, make them immunosuppressed, so they might decide that you know what, I want that remote option. Or they might say yeah, you know, I have asthma but I still want to be a part of these in person classes.

Now, I imagine the tricky part here from the university perspective is if professors and other students are trying to kind of police you know, what's going on and making sure that people are doing their due diligence and wearing their masks as they're supposed to be, I don't know what they would put in place if the student would have to have like, some sort of information on them that says that they have been approved for this

accommodation. I don't know if that would be legal or if someone would have to present a card to say that you know, they're immunocompromised – I'm sorry – not immunocompromised, that they can't wear a mask because of their – because of, you know, a health condition or they are exempt from wearing a mask.

I don't know what the legal implications would be and also I have kind of looked to what's going on in different states and counties around this because I think the challenges that people have faced like in the supermarket have been kind of helpful for drawing this out because we do know that a lot of supermarkets are offering people with disabilities and the elderly different hours for shopping. And there have been some cases where people with disabilities who can't wear masks have encountered some challenges around being able to go into the store without a mask.

And so, I think – I think there's a lot more conversation that has to be had. Universities typically kind of make their decisions based on case law and based on what they – what they think will be most appropriate and helpful to support the student. This is kind of new territory so I'm not sure that anybody has quite figured this specific issue out yet. But I imagine they will have to figure it out soon.

>> CALEB BERKEMEIER: Yeah. Definitely a complicated issue. It makes me wonder; do you have a sense of how collaboratively different departments are working with each other in the university to solve some of these issues or does it seem like this is just being dumped on people in disability services to figure out?

>> ANNIE TULKIN: I think universities are notoriously siloed places, meaning that departments kind of operate individually. And I think that there are probably campuses that do have good collaboration across departments and then there are others who, you know, have less collaboration across departments.

I think that typically, students with disabilities are not on the top of the list in terms of considerations for how universities are kind of processing these issues. However, I personally believe that they should be high up on the list because we know that from data, that 20% of undergraduate students are students with disabilities and that includes students with learning disabilities, mobility impairments, health conditions, and mental health

conditions. And we also know that those are just the students who have gone into the Disability Support Office and requested accommodations.

So, we can imagine then it's actually far more than 20% who may be able to go in and request accommodations because of a condition or a disability that they might have. So, it's probably closer to 40%-plus of undergraduate students on campus in the United States who have disabilities.

So, I think when we're talking about numbers like that, it should be a priority for universities to think about and consider and address how students with disabilities are going to be, you know, interfacing and the kind of conditions that they might face once they're on that college campus in the fall, either virtually or you know, in person.

And likewise, I think we should also be looking at this issue around faculty and staff because that's a whole other population of people who may have a disability or a health condition and maybe they haven't disclosed to their employer that they have some needs or maybe they haven't because maybe they haven't had to or maybe they didn't feel comfortable doing so.

And so, I imagine that we'll see a lot more faculty and staff with disabilities coming forward to say that they have needs related to COVID-19 issues and want to request accommodations as well. But I'm sure that the lawyers and the General Counsel's office are probably looking at all of this and their chat boards are probably a flurry right now trying to figure out these pieces.

>> CALEB BERKEMEIER: Yes. I would imagine so. So, let's turn to another aspect of the university experience that maybe some people would overlook. For prospective students, it's always been very important to visit campuses in person to kind of see it, to see if this is a place that they really want to be. I would imagine that a lot of this is happening virtually now.

What might be some of the issues that would arise for a student with a disability when it comes to a virtual tour?

>> ANNIE TULKIN: Yeah. I'm glad you asked that. I actually – I did some writing on this recently because I recognized that there wasn't a lot out

there kind of guiding students with physical disabilities and health conditions on the remote options for doing a college search.

So, many campuses closed down in the spring and now are just – some of them are reopening for summer but that's a time where a lot of students would have gone on college tours and the summertime as well. They would have done a lot of tours of campus in person because if you are a rising senior in high school, you are thinking about those college applications which are due in the fall. So, you might be kind of, you know, zeroing in on your top schools that you want to apply to.

If you have a physical disability, it is sometimes even more important to visit the campus to get a sense of how it feels for you. I think you know, a lot of people with physical disabilities will understand the thing I'm about to say next which is that just because something is ADA compliant or technically compliant doesn't mean that it will work for them.

Every school will likely tell students that yeah, we're ADA compliant. But what that actually means can be a little bit different from place to place. And specifically in how accommodations are administered might look a little different and also just the physical accessibility of the campus, so the topography, right? Is the campus hilly? Is it a historic campus, meaning that it's challenging and has cobblestones and bricks and things like that?

Those are things that you – you can't really get a feel for when you're watching a video or talking to someone. You almost need to be there to experience them.

And so, there's a lot of tours now, virtual tours. There is one company that has the most tours. It's called UVisit and students can go and take like a virtual college tour. The challenge with that is it's – it shows you kind of the fronts of buildings and they give you a lot of information about the courses that are taught there and the student life and things like that, but you may look at the front of that building and be able to kind of toggle around on your computer and see like, the sides and things like that. But for a lot of schools, the accessible entrance is not in the front of the building.

And so, for me, if I was thinking oh, okay, I'm a person who uses a wheelchair, how would I access this building? I'd want to know, you know,

where would that access be? Do I have to go around the back to where the dumpsters are? Is there a blue push button? Are there kick plates? Do I have to ring a doorbell to get in? Because again, that scale of accessibility and compliance is very different from school to school.

And so, what I have been recommending that students with physical disabilities do is if they are really, really interested in a specific school, once they kind of pare it down to you know, a handful of schools, that they contact the Disability Support Office and see if they can be connected with other students, current students who have physical disabilities to actually have a conversation with those students about what it's like to navigate that campus because if they can't go in person, you know, at least they can get some information to see what it might be like.

Another great tool for that is just kind of googling and using Google Maps as well because Google Maps now has a lot more accessibility features and street views. So, sometimes you can actually go you know, on campus using the Google – the Google tools to kind of see what that looks like, to kind of get a sense of what the feel might be.

And so, that's kind of the angle for students with physical disabilities. I think the virtual tour options in terms of you know, if you have a health condition or if you have a mental health condition, one of the things that you might also want to do in addition to going on the virtual tours is to contact the student health center and have a conversation about what they do or do not do in the student health center.

So, for example, many student health centers are just kind of setup to support students, you know, if they have a cold or if they injure themselves. But they would refer you out if you needed something more significant.

So, if you needed shots for something or if you needed to have more specific treatments, you might also want to consider thinking about you know, what hospital centers are nearby or what doctors are nearby this campus so that if I needed to have, you know, my transfusion or this type of shot, that I could go and get that kind of easily.

I would also recommend that students connect with the counseling center, the mental health services to see about you know, how many times a student can be seen at the campus counseling center and just kind of get

a sense of what supports and services they offer as well, kind of based on the student's specific needs.

The other thing that I have seen a lot of universities just offering is if you go to their admissions page, there might be student panels that they are hosting too. Those are usually like live virtual student panels so students can, who are considering that school, can actually log in and ask questions of current students. They don't always feature students with visible disabilities but you never know. The students who are on that panel may have an invisible disability so I always encourage my clients to actually ask the questions that are most relevant to them and hopefully the admissions people can point them in the right direction if they are unable to answer that question. So, there are virtual student panels. YouTube has a lot of like, campus tours as well that might be helpful for students to check out, narrow in.

But possibly the most important thing that a student can do in this college search setting is to contact the Disability Support Office and make an appointment to ask questions about the types of services and supports that a student might receive on that campus and just to have a conversation about what that process is for requesting accommodations, what the expectations are, and figure out if you get a good vibe from those people in that disability support office.

Because as much as the university is kind of interviewing you and considering you for admission, you the student and the consumer, quite frankly, want to make sure that you're comfortable there too and you feel supported in that environment. So, I always tell students to connect with those disability support offices prior to accepting if possible.

>> CALEB BERKEMEIER: I think that's a great place to wrap up. This has been a lot of great information, Annie. We really thank you for joining us to talk about it.

If people want to learn more about this or get in touch with you, how can they do that?

>> ANNIE TULKIN: Sure. So, my website is www.accessiblecollege.com. That's A-C-C-E-S-S-I-B-L-E College, C-O-L-L-E-G-E, Accessible College dot com.

I'm also on Facebook. You can just look at @AccessibleCollege and I am on Twitter as well at @ACSSCollege. So, you can find me in those places. We can also put my email address kind of in the – in the transcript of this if that's helpful, Caleb, as well.

>> CALEB BERKEMEIER: Yeah. We'll definitely do that. Thanks, Annie.

>> ANNIE TULKIN: Yeah. Thank you.

>> CALEB BERKEMEIER: ADA today is produced by the MidAtlantic ADA Center and is part of the WADA Podcast Network.

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