

Self-Determination

Self-determination is a critical skill for the success of students with disabilities because after high school graduation they are no longer entitled to the services detailed in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004. During postsecondary education (college, university, trade school or vocational school, etc.), people with disabilities must disclose and describe their need for accommodations to the Office of Disability Services, which determines their eligibility for those accommodations. Students with disabilities may need to advocate for accommodations that are not readily offered. They may also need to explain their accommodations to others, such as professors or roommates.

A student must believe that he or she can be successful, make decisions, act independently, evaluate and modify performance in various situations as necessary, and adjust goals and plans to improve performance or success.

Self-determination can be defined as:

- **Self-advocacy** refers to the ability to express one's needs, wants, and rights assertively.
- **Self-awareness** is the ability to identify and understand one's needs, interests, strengths, limitations, and values.
- **Self-efficacy** is commonly referred to as self-confidence—the belief that one will attain a goal.
- **Decision-making** is the complex skill of setting goals, planning actions, identifying information to make decisions, and choosing the best option to reach one's goals.
- **Independent performance** is the ability to start and complete tasks through self-management strategies.
- **Self-evaluation** includes the ability to self-assess performance and determine when a goal or task has been satisfactorily completed.
- **Adjustment** is the process of revising one's goals and plans to improve performance or success.



What is the relationship between self-determination and locus of control?

A critical factor related to self-determination is a locus of control. Locus of control refers to the location—either external or internal—in which one places responsibility for events. When people operate with



an external locus of control, they perceive limited control over what happens to them and believe that outside sources are responsible for the outcomes they experience. They do not see themselves as causal agents, but rather as passive recipients in the events of their lives. In other words, chance, fate, luck, and the actions of others—which are forces beyond their control—are perceived as the causal factors in their life experiences, rather than their own actions.

When individuals operate with an internal locus of control, they feel they have control over what happens to them, and they can readily see the relationship between their actions and the outcomes.

They assume the role of the causal agent in their own

lives, rather than that of a passive recipient of the action of others. Internal locus of control is a necessary foundation for developing self-determination skills. People with a strong sense of internal locus of control can reflect on their strengths, limitations, and needs (self-awareness), learn to assert their needs and rights (self-advocacy), develop goals, and make decisions. They develop an awareness of outside forces and internal fears, both barriers to their goals that may limit success. With this awareness, they can take the necessary steps to minimize or eliminate these barriers.

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What can educators and parents do to encourage self-determination among secondary school-age students (age 14 +)?

Izzo and Lamb (2002) offer eight suggestions to shift the focus of education from fostering dependence to encouraging self-determined independence that results in positive post-school outcomes for students with disabilities:

- Empower parents as partners in promoting self-determination and career development skills.
- Facilitate student-centered IEP meetings and self-directed learning models.

- Increase students' awareness of their disabilities and needed accommodations.
- Offer credit-bearing classes in self-determination and careers.
- Teach and reinforce students to develop an internal locus of control.
- Teach and promote self-advocacy skills and support student application of those skills.
- Infuse self-determination and career development skills into the general education curriculum.
- Develop and implement work-based learning programs for all students.

What can students with disabilities in postsecondary educational settings do to increase self-determination skills?

Students with disabilities can work with both college disabilities counselors and vocational rehabilitation counselors to develop a plan to increase their self-determination skills. Frequently, community colleges offer freshmen career-planning classes. These classes can help students develop the independent learning skills and personal responsibility that are necessary for success in postsecondary education.

Students with disabilities who work with counselors to resolve difficulties in learning or increase their school success can renew a positive outlook and create a vision for success. Personal counselors can also help students develop realistic goals and action plans for a more successful postsecondary education experience. Students with disabilities who are contemplating higher education should also participate in their IEP planning meetings, making their needs and preferences heard, and practice good communication and problem-solving skills with the adults on their team.

