



## **Flourishing in College with a Physical Disability: An Interview with Margot Keale**



Students who use wheelchairs and other mobility aids have the added challenge of having to consider the physical accessibility of the campus and its surrounding areas. This month, we invited Margot Keale to share her story. She is a recent graduate of Georgetown University. Margot was admitted to college before she was using a wheelchair. As her physical ability changed, she had to consider and ultimately manage a number of things related to this change. Below, she shares a bit about her concerns and her journey.

### **1. Think back to when you were considering college. What were your concerns?**

I didn't have a disability when I was looking for college. The wheelchair (and related questions and concerns and fears!) came after I had been admitted. Of course, once I decided to still attend college away from home, I began to worry: How would I live independent of my parents? How would I manage schoolwork with physical therapy? How would I get around campus (one that is known for all of its hills)? Where would I sit in a stadium style lecture hall? Would it be weird to live in a dorm with my aide? Though, even with all of these concerns nothing worried me more than knowing whether or not I would make friends. *Spoiler alert:* I did and I promise you will too.

### **2. Who supported you in your college search?**

My parents were (and remain) my biggest advocates and supporters. They encouraged me to face my fears, take a risk, and move away for college. I knew that I could take that leap of faith, because even if things didn't work out, they'd be there to pick me back up. In my experience, having support has made a tremendous difference in my ability to succeed.

### **3. What things were you looking for in a college? Were those things related to your disability? If so, what were they?**

Once I decided to attend college, it became most important to me to figure out where I would live. Where are the accessible rooms on campus? Can I live among my peers? Is it possible to have an aide live with me? Are bathrooms communal or private? Are floors co-ed? How will I maintain privacy while also being social, as most college students are?

Nothing else mattered to me if I didn't have a home base that was comfortable and accommodated my personal needs.

**4. If you had to do it again, or have done it since (masters/phd) what would you look for in a college, what questions would you ask?**

Great questions! I think making sure your living space suits your personal needs is really key. Will you have the opportunity to live with your peers throughout your educational experience? Will you always live in a dorm room or are on-campus apartments an option? Can you easily access other people's living spaces to socialize? College will become your home for four years, so you want to feel like you can dig-in, grow some roots, and make it your space, which may include a need for special accommodations. Don't be afraid to speak up and ask for what you'd like.

**5. What specific issues related to your disability/needs did you have to navigate once you got to college?**

My disability is physical in nature, so my needs relate to accommodations in space. I had to ensure that my living space suited my needs / preferences, that classroom buildings had easy access, that classrooms had desks that I could work at, and that I could physically get from Point A to Point B. A lot of solutions were found through trial and error; sometimes, it takes time to figure out what works. Being patient with yourself and with the people who you are working with to remove obstacles (both the physical and not-so physical) is key.

**6. What suggestions would you have for someone with a disability who is applying to college?**

It is important to know who on campus can help you navigate and access the resources available. When things come up unexpectedly, as they always do, knowing who to call for help or advice can mitigate a lot of stress and chaos. Make those connections and develop that network early; those people will quickly become your advocates and allies.



