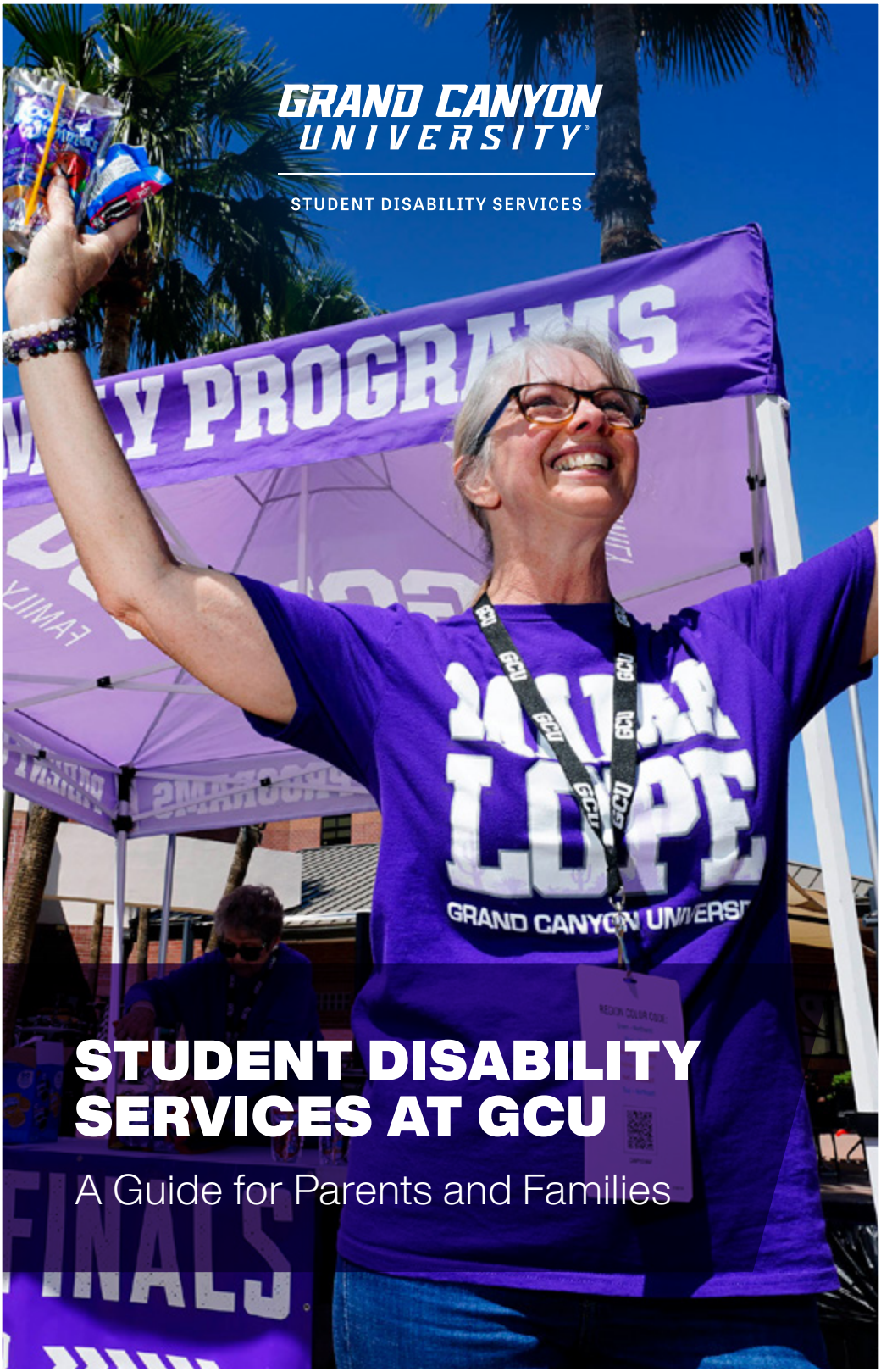
GRAND CANYON UNIVERSITY

STUDENT DISABILITY SERVICES



STUDENT DISABILITY SERVICES AT GCU

A Guide for Parents and Families

Starting college is a big step for you, your student and your family! For many students, it's the first real taste of independence and the beginning of an exciting chapter. But with new opportunities also come challenges and questions, especially if your student has a disability.

How can you make sure they are ready for college life at GCU? This transition might seem overwhelming, but rest assured, GCU can help support your student with their permanent or temporary disability needs.

In higher education, the student is the driver. We recommend that your student learn how to talk about their disability and its impact on them in an educational setting. GCU's Student Disability Services Office (SDS) is here to support your student every step of the way. This guide walks you through what to expect and how you can support them as they transition to university life.

Although this guide was developed to provide an overview of relevant information and resources, it is important for you and your student to review and understand the Student Access Policy in the University Policy Handbook, which contains detailed and specific information about the process in its entirety.

We hope this guide helps you better understand how the SDS Office can support students with diverse needs and provide tips on how to best support your student on their exciting new college journey.

We look forward to working with your student!

Sincerely,

Grand Canyon University
Student Disability Services Office
602-639-6342
DisabilityOffice@gcu.edu
gcu.edu/sds

How Disability Services Differ Between High School and Postsecondary Education

In transitioning from high school to college, many parents are surprised to learn that colleges and universities have different requirements than high schools when it comes to providing services to individuals with disabilities. Learning the specific differences can help prepare you and your student for what to expect.

Colleges are **required** to:	Colleges are **not required** to:
▪ Make all college programs and services academically and physically accessible. ▪ Provide auxiliary aids, equipment and other reasonable resources so that students with disabilities have equal access. ▪ Provide reasonable accommodations so that students have the opportunity to equally participate in classes and activities.	▪ Provide specific aids or accommodations if an equal aid or accommodation will meet the need. ▪ Provide accommodations that fundamentally alter, lower or substantially modify essential requirements of the course or program. ▪ Lower admission criteria or programmatic essential elements. ▪ Provide diagnostic assessments/Individualized Education Plans (IEP), personally prescribed devices, personal transportation or mobility devices, personal assistants/ aides or private tutoring. ▪ Follow the requirements of an IEP plan.

Applicable Laws	
High School	**College**
The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is about student success.	The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is about student access.
Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Subpart D.	Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Subpart E.

Parent's Role	
High School	**College**
The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974 allows parents to have full access to their student's education record.	The FERPA regulations state that, in higher education, the student owns their education record and experience. Students can choose to provide authorization for their college to disclose portions of their academic record, but the authorization is limited to releasing records only and does not allow a parent or third party to act on their behalf or participate in college processes in their stead.
Parents participate in the IEP or 504 plan meetings.	Parents cannot represent the student or take any action on their behalf. Any conversation or communication regarding the student must include the student.
Teachers discuss progress reports and grades with parents.	Faculty will not communicate with parents. All information about learning, instruction and grades should come from and will be communicated with the student.

Self-Advocacy	
High School	**College**
Parents are expected to advocate for their student.	Students are expected to self-advocate by understanding their disability and their needs.
Teachers monitor your student's progress and intervene if they believe they need assistance.	Faculty are here to help, but students are responsible for initiating contact with them if they need assistance.

Obtaining Services	
High School	**College**
Students are identified by parents and teachers.	Students must self-identify to the SDS Office.
Specific services are outlined in an IEP or 504 plan.	Students must request specific accommodations and provide supporting evidence through documentation.

Documentation	
High School	**College**
Documentation focuses on determining whether a student qualifies for services, based on specific disability categories in IDEA.	Colleges have specific documentation requirements. Minimally, it must be from a qualified medical provider, typed on letterhead and appropriately signed. The documentation must state the disability, provide information on how the disability limits the ability to fully participate, outline functional limitations and demonstrate a need for specific accommodations.
IEP and 504 plans may be renewed and continue through high school.	An IEP alone is typically insufficient; however, it can be submitted as documentation to inform and determine reasonable accommodations. Colleges are not obligated to follow the requirements of an IEP plan.

Accommodations	
High School	**College**
Modifications are provided through an IEP, 504 plan and individualized instruction.	Reasonable accommodations are provided to ensure equal access and participation.
Modifications that alter curriculum or change course outcomes are permitted through an IEP.	Colleges cannot offer accommodations that fundamentally alter, lower or substantially modify essential requirements of the course or program. Students are responsible for meeting any programmatic essential elements.
Modifications are broadly defined and typically allow the implementation of any type of adjustment.	Accommodations are determined on a case-by-case basis in conjunction with supporting documentation.

All accommodation requests are reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

Courses and Instruction	
High School	**College**
Teachers have full access to a student's IEP or 504 plan and are included in meetings about the student's progress under the plan.	Faculty receive a brief letter verifying a student's approved accommodations. They do not receive information about a student's specific disability or diagnosis unless it is necessary to facilitate the accommodation.
Teachers work with students on due dates.	Students are responsible for knowing when their assignments are due. Faculty are not permitted to provide accommodations outside of what is approved by the SDS Office.
Teachers may modify assignments and tests or waive portions to help reflect competency.	Modified grades and exams are not available. Assignments and other deliverables are not waived. Students are responsible for submitting all required work; however, they may be eligible for exam or due date accommodations.
Teachers may provide extra credit.	There are no opportunities for extra credit.
Teachers may allow test retakes for a higher grade.	Exam retakes are seldom an option and are offered under extenuating circumstances only, not as an accommodation.
Teachers present information during class to walk students through their textbook and study materials.	Professors have lectures and supplemental materials to enhance the textbook and course materials, which are expected to be read/reviewed prior to class.
Individual tutoring and study services may be provided as part of an IEP or 504 plan.	Studying and tutoring are not accommodations. Students may utilize campus tutoring services on their own time, based on availability.

Self-Advocacy

In college, students are responsible for requesting disability accommodations and seeking out available support services. To do this effectively, they must understand their disability, recognize their strengths and challenges and identify the strategies that work best for them. Developing strong self-advocacy skills is essential for students with disabilities to navigate the college environment and access the resources they need.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself, then discuss with your student, to gauge whether they can self-advocate and if they feel prepared for college:

- What conversations can I have with my student about college life, and how does college differ from high school?
- Is my student prepared to take on the responsibilities associated with being a college student? If not, what steps can I take to support my student in developing these responsibilities before they leave for college?
- How well can my student clearly and effectively communicate information about their disability?
- How can I encourage my student to take an active, leading role in managing their own educational needs?

Self-advocacy helps to ensure your student becomes an expert on themselves and their own experiences in college and beyond.

FERPA

Under FERPA, students who are 18 or older, or who attend a postsecondary institution, have the right to privacy regarding their educational records and control over the disclosure of this information. Parents do not automatically have access to these records; your student must provide permission by completing a Student Information Release Form (SIRF) if they wish to share specific information with you.

While a SIRF allows GCU to provide you with a copy of specific information pertaining to your student's education record, it does not permit university staff to discuss the record, allow you to act on your student's behalf or include you in all university communications. Records are typically released as paper documents, rather than through detailed discussions with university staff. Outside of authorized information releases, it is your student's responsibility to share information with you.

What Can Be Accommodated?

The SDS Office meets with your student to support them as they pursue their academic goals. Whether your student needs short-term support while recovering from a medical issue or ongoing accommodations for a disability, the SDS Office walks alongside them. Each accommodation request is reviewed individually because every student's needs are unique. The goal of the SDS Office is to empower your student, not just to get through college, but also to build confidence and independence for life after graduation.

Academic Support

Every student learns differently, and the SDS Office is here to help your student access their coursework in a way that works best for them, such as:

- Extra time for tests or assignments is one of the most common accommodations. Testing accommodations do not approve additional days; only additional time is allowed.
- If your student ever finds course materials difficult to access, the SDS Office can assist, as GCU strives to ensure all course materials are presented in an accessible format.
- Accommodations can vary slightly between online and in-person classes, depending on the course setup.
- It's also worth noting that high school accommodations may not apply in the university setting, as college courses have different requirements.

Housing and Campus Life

The SDS Office can help make on-campus living and campus life more accessible for your student through the following accommodations:

- Accessible housing features, such as roll-in showers, can be arranged if medically supported.
- Assistive support animals may be approved with the correct documentation.
- Food tours help students understand dining options and available support resources on campus.
- Parking assistance is available.
- The SDS Office can also coordinate accommodations for special campus events if your student wants to participate.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Connection Program

For students on the autism spectrum, the ASD Connection Program offers individualized support that includes academic guidance, social connection and help with accommodations.

Steps to Accommodation

The interactive process is collaborative between the SDS Office and students to determine reasonable accommodations for temporary and permanent disability needs.

In college, the goal of accommodations is to remove barriers for students with a disability by ensuring equal access to the learning environment. Only accommodations that do not fundamentally alter, lower or substantially modify essential requirements of the course or program can be approved.

All students are held to the same standards across their programs of study, and the same accommodations that your student had in the K12 setting may not be applicable in higher education.

- **Starting the process:** Your student begins by filling out the Accommodation Request Form, located at sds.gcu.edu. This is how they inform the SDS Office of any support they may need.
- **Sharing documentation:** Your student will provide supporting documentation to the SDS Office. The University Policy Handbook outlines the types of information required; the SDS Office can help address specific questions.
- **Approved accommodations:** Once accommodations are approved, the SDS Office will notify your student and their instructors. Private medical details are never shared unless they are necessary to help implement the accommodations.
- **Unapproved accommodations:** If an accommodation isn't approved (in full or partially), your student can use the Accommodation Grievance Procedure to request a review. The steps for that process are explained in the University Policy Handbook.
- **Ongoing conversations:** Your student can meet with their assigned SDS Office administrator at any time to review how things are going or talk about how accommodations can be used in classes.
- **When needs change:** If your student finds that their accommodations aren't quite meeting their needs or if their medical situation changes, they should contact the SDS Office to explore options. Only the SDS Office can approve or adjust accommodations. Sometimes, updated documentation may be needed.
- **If concerns come up:** If your student has any concerns about how their accommodations are being implemented, they should reach out directly to the SDS Office. This is where self-advocacy skills are important. Faculty and staff outside of the SDS Office can't make changes to approved accommodations.
- **Keeping accommodations active:** Accommodations stay in place until the listed expiration date or until your student has been absent for longer than 14 days. If they take a longer break, they must reconnect with the SDS Office to reestablish their accommodations.

Documentation Requirements

Qualifying for accommodations in higher education differs significantly from the process for obtaining services in K-12.

As your student moves from high school to college, you may already be familiar with IEPs or 504 plans. However, it's important to know that while a doctor's note or a school-issued plan, such as an IEP or a 504 plan, can be helpful, these documents alone are not enough to fully document a disability at the college level. Instead, they should be included as part of a more comprehensive evaluation.

In college, documentation must come from a qualified provider who is familiar with your student's needs. Documentation must clearly explain how your student's disability currently affects their academic performance. Because accommodations are based on the present impact of a disability, it's crucial to ensure that all documentation and testing are recent and reflect your student's current needs.

Accommodations cannot be reviewed or approved until appropriate documentation is on file with the SDS Office. The SDS Office may need to request additional documentation if the initial submission is insufficient, and you may need to work with your student to help them obtain the additional information.

Resolving Concerns

Encourage your student to gradually take an active role in understanding their accommodations and asking for clarification when needed. If your student is proactive about communicating their questions or concerns, the SDS Office can assist them and provide guidance to help them navigate issues. Although you may feel compelled to reach out on behalf of your student, keep in mind that the SDS Office cannot communicate with you in place of your student or include or copy you on all communication between the SDS Office and your student, even if a SIRF is on file. If you contact the SDS Office directly to inquire about your

student, they can only provide general policy and process information. The SDS Office is your student's point of contact if they find their circumstances have changed or that their accommodations are no longer meeting their needs. Students can request additional accommodations, and those requests will be reviewed through the interactive process. Approval depends on the supporting documentation and is also contingent upon other factors, such as the point in time of the semester, program of study and any other university policies that may apply.

Although it is important for your student to work with their instructors on any course-related concerns, only the SDS Office can approve or modify accommodations. Faculty are not permitted to provide accommodations beyond what was approved through the interactive process.

Accommodation Animals

Any students who require a service or accommodation animal to live in GCU housing must go through the Steps to Accommodation process. Service animals and requests for an animal as an accommodation serve distinct and separate purposes and have different requirements. This information is non-exhaustive.

Please review the University Policy Handbook for detailed information on this topic.

Service Animals:

- They are defined by ADA law as dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities.
- A specific housing accommodation request is required.
- They are permitted in all buildings, classroom spaces and public communal areas.
- One cannot be shared between students, nor are other students permitted to provide care or feeding for the animal.

Accommodation Animals:

Under federal guidance from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, emotional support animals no longer receive automatic fair housing protections. A May 2026 Enforcement Memo rescinded prior rules, requiring that assistance animals be individually trained to perform specific disability-related tasks to qualify for reasonable accommodations.

- A specific housing accommodation request is required.
- Documentation that confirms the student's disability and the need for the animal is required; general online certificates, registrations and licensing documents are not acceptable. Documentation must meet the criteria outlined in the University Policy Handbook.
- An appropriate, qualified medical provider must be familiar with your student's disability, the need for the animal as part of an individualized ongoing care plan and that the student's need meets the other criteria outlined in the University Policy Handbook.
- They can only stay in the student's residence and in eateries with outdoor seating. Accommodation animals are not permitted in academic spaces or communal areas, whether indoors or outdoors.
- One cannot be shared between students, nor are other students permitted to provide care or feeding for the animal.
- Animals are not allowed on GCU-sponsored travel.
- They must remain in your student's care during long periods away from campus, including school breaks and holiday periods when your student isn't living on campus.
- They are not permitted on campus prior to approval. Violations will result in the immediate removal of the animal from campus property until official approval is obtained. Violations will also result in a Code of Conduct referral.

Frequently Asked Questions

Differences Between High School and College Disability Services

Will my student receive the same disability services they received in high school?
In higher education, only accommodations that do not fundamentally alter, lower or substantially modify essential requirements of the course or program can be approved. Therefore, potentially some, but not all, accommodations received in high school may be available.

Will my student follow the same IEP they had in high school?
No. K-12 and postsecondary laws and requirements differ, as well as the available services and accommodations. An IEP can be submitted as documentation to inform and determine reasonable accommodations, but postsecondary schools are not obligated to follow the requirements of an IEP plan.

Do accommodations need to be renewed every year, like a 504 plan or an IEP?
Academic accommodations for a permanent disability will automatically be applied each semester. If students wish to modify their accommodations, they need to complete a new Accommodation Request Form. If a student takes a break from classes, they must send us a new Accommodation Request Form to reestablish their accommodations.

My student is transferring from another college. Can they transfer their accommodations?
Students should not assume they will receive the same accommodations at GCU as they had at their previous school. Each college and university establishes documentation and accommodation guidelines based on its academic program objectives and outcomes. Documentation sufficient for one institution may not be sufficient for another.

Are there services or accommodations that the SDS Office does not provide?

- Diagnostic assessments to determine eligibility
- Personally prescribed devices (e.g., hearing aids or specialty glasses)
- Personal transportation or mobility devices (e.g., wheelchairs or scooters)
- Personal assistants or aides
- Private tutoring

Parent and Student Roles and Responsibilities

What responsibilities do I have for my student with disabilities?

Your student is now considered an adult, and the goal is for them to become their own advocate. They must be involved in the accommodation process, as they are the ones to use them. As their parent, you are encouraged to coach and support them in developing their self-advocacy skills.

Can I request an accommodation for my student?

No. Only the student of record can act on their own account. They must complete the accommodation request themselves.

Can I reach out to my student's instructors directly?

No. Students must communicate with their instructors themselves. If experiencing issues, students should contact the SDS Office for assistance.

I had regular communication with my student's teachers in high school. Can I get updates on my student's status from the SDS Office?

Updates must come from your student. You cannot communicate directly with their instructors, but you may be included in conversations with the SDS Office if your student requests.

How can I monitor my student's grades?

If you were granted approval to have information about your student's grades via a SIRF, assistance is available from their student services counselor.

How can I gain access to speak on my student's behalf?

A SIRF must be completed to fulfill FERPA guidelines. With a SIRF, limited information can be shared; only the student can act on their account.

My student keeps sharing concerns with me, and I'm not sure they're being addressed. What steps should I take?

Have your student schedule a meeting with the SDS Office and include you if desired, so concerns can be addressed together. Our office generally responds within 24–48 hours.

How can I help my student who is struggling in classes, even with accommodations?

Encourage your student to use all granted accommodations. Your student can also ask for assistance from the SDS Office, as they may be able to refer them to additional resources, such as tutoring. If accommodations need to be changed, your student must request and provide documentation.

How can I help my student be successful at GCU?

Help them understand the differences in disability services between high school and college, support their independence and guide them to self-advocate and seek help when needed.

Accommodations Process and Implementation

What are Grand Canyon University's documentation criteria?

GCU requires a typed, signed letter from a medical provider that explains your student's symptoms and challenges and how they impact your student at school.

Note: Documentation in higher education is determined independently by each institution. The documentation criteria vary from institution to institution, meaning accommodations at one university do not guarantee the same accommodations at another.

Once my student is approved for accommodations in college, how are they implemented?

The SDS Office sends notifications as needed.

- **Academic accommodations:** Emails are sent to instructors, and adjustments are made in the learning system.
- **Non-academic accommodations:** Coordination occurs with housing, facilities and other departments.

Who at GCU is aware of a student's disability status?

A student's disability status is confidential within the SDS Office, but other staff may be informed of an accommodation as needed to provide services. They are told only the needed accommodation, not the underlying disability.

Does the SDS Office provide check-ins with students?

The SDS Office can schedule weekly meetings for those who want check-ins, course planning or resource guidance. However, students must seek help themselves.

Who can assist a student struggling academically?

GCU offers various resources to support students with academic struggles. See the "Resources" section below or contact the SDS Office for help finding support.

Who can assist a student struggling socially?

Support is available for students who face social struggles. The "Resources" section below or the SDS Office can help direct students to the proper resources.

Does the SDS Office offer tutoring services?

Tutoring for all GCU students is available at no cost through the Academic Centers for Excellence (ACE), both in-person and online.

How can my student register for housing accommodations?

Students must complete an Accommodation Request Form and submit documentation. Please read the "Steps to Accommodation" and "Documentation Requirements" sections above for requesting accommodations and submitting documentation.

My student is experiencing challenges with their living arrangements on campus. What options do they have?

Your student can speak with Residence Life staff for assistance with roommate or living issues. For disability/accessibility issues, students should contact the SDS Office.

What if I have questions about the disability services my student is receiving?

Questions should first be addressed to your student. If your student has concerns about accommodations, they should contact the SDS Office immediately.

Important Resources and Contacts

Contact	Phone	Email
Academic Centers for Excellence	602-639-8901	ace@gcu.edu
Campus Operations (Parking)	602-639-7739	campus.parking@gcu.edu
Canyon Health and Wellness Clinic	602-639-6215	HealthCenter@gcu.edu
Career Services	602-639-6417	CareerServices@gcu.edu
Department of Campus Recreation	602-639-7559	CampusRecreation@gcu.edu
Department of Housing Operations	602-639-6240	housing@gcu.edu
Department of Residence Life	602-639-6244	residence.life@gcu.edu
Department of Spiritual Life	602-639-6750	SpiritualLife@gcu.edu
Department of Student Care	602-639-7007	StudentCare@gcu.edu
Department of Student Engagement	602-639-7250	student.engagement@gcu.edu
Department of Welcome Programs	602-639-6002	WelcomePrograms@gcu.edu
GCU Library	602-639-6641	library@gcu.edu
Institutional Access and Compliance (Title IX)	602-639-5900	TitleIX@gcu.edu
International Students Office	602-639-8105	iso@gcu.edu
Mail and Copy Center	602-639-7905	MailCenter@gcu.edu
Multicultural Office	602-639-7756	MulticulturalOffice@gcu.edu
Office of Academic Records	800-800-9776	AcademicRecords@gcu.edu
Parent Resources	602-639-8950	ParentConnection@gcu.edu
Public Safety	602-639-8100	GCUPD@gcu.edu
Student Disability Services (SDS)	602-639-6342	DisabilityOffice@gcu.edu
Student Employment Team	N/A	StudentEmploymentTeam@gcu.edu
Student Services Counselors (SSC)	800-800-9776	Your student's SSC's email address
Technical Support	877-428-8447	TechSupport@gcu.edu

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