



KNOW YOUR RIGHTS:
**Vocational Rehabilitation &
Higher Education**

DRO

Disability
Rights
Oregon

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INTRODUCTION: HOW VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION CAN HELP YOU GO TO COLLEGE OR CAREER SCHOOL

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is focused on getting people with disabilities into the workforce. **VR can support training in any field or career** that requires postsecondary education or a degree. Those fields could include science, technology, mathematics, law, and medicine. Those careers could include trades, like plumbing, cosmetology, barbering, dentistry, or tattooing.

VR can provide help with planning for college or career school. Career schools are also known as trade schools, vocational schools, or technical schools. VR can also provide help with some of the costs of attendance.

The following agencies and programs provide VR services:

- Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation Services (OVRs)
- Oregon Commission for the Blind (OCB)
- Oregon Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation programs

BEFORE YOU ASK FOR EDUCATION SERVICES

A specific college degree or career school certification must be necessary

You need an employment goal that requires a specific college degree or career school certification to get a job in the field. There must be a **clear connection** between the need for a degree and your ability to obtain a job in a specific field.

Example: To become a registered nurse (RN), you are required to get a bachelor's degree from a nursing school.

In other scenarios, a degree may be helpful, but not necessary.

Example: You may not need an English degree to become a freelance writer.

VR may ask you to think about other ways of gaining experience in the field that can help you find employment.

Plan ahead with an Individual Plan for Employment (IPE)

Apply for VR services at least 6 months before you plan to attend school.

- An eligibility determination for services can take up to 60 days (two months).
- You will then develop an Individual Plan for Employment (IPE), which details the services that VR will provide to assist you. Developing an IPE can take up to 90 days (three months).

- That process can take up to five months. You will need additional time to apply for school, register for classes, and complete a Federal Application for Student Aid.
- Typically the costs that VR can assist with must be pre-approved in an IPE before they are paid out.

Exhaust other funding sources first

VR can only assist with costs for education that can't be paid for by other programs. You are required to complete a Federal Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA) to determine if you qualify for any grants, such as Pell Grants. If you qualify for any grants, they will be applied before VR assistance.

Look at public, in-state schools first

VR is required to choose in-state public schools first when they help with education. See if your job goal requires a degree that can be obtained through a program at a public college or university.

Examples of public colleges and universities:

- University of Oregon
 - Oregon State University
 - Portland State University
 - Chemeteka Community College
 - Portland Community College
-

VR can only consider private or out-of-state programs if no public in-state alternative is available.

If your employment goal includes a trade like cosmetology, barbering, and tattooing, many career schools are private. In these situations, VR will assist with the lowest-cost option that will help you obtain the required degree or certification for your employment goal.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: Do I need to take out student loans before asking VR for assistance?

No. You are required to fill out the FAFSA. If you qualify for federal student loans, they are not considered a “comparable benefit.” VR cannot require you to accept them.

If you qualify for grants and scholarships, you must accept them before VR will assist with the remaining cost. Student loans do not fall into this category.

Q: I defaulted on old student loans. Can I still ask VR for help?

Yes. You must still look for alternative sources of funding. VR may require you to take steps to become eligible for federal financial aid, like grants. In most cases, this will mean setting up a payment plan on the old student loans. You may be able to set up a plan with the lender to make small monthly payments based on your income.

After you do this and submit a FAFSA, VR can assist with costs not covered by Pell Grants or some scholarships. You would not be required to take out any new student loans.

Q: In the past I discharged old student loans through a Total and Permanent Disability determination. Can I still get help with going back to school?

Yes. Total and Permanent Disability (TPD) determination does not prevent you from getting VR assistance. TPD only prevents you from obtaining Pell Grants for three years after the TPD determination. If you obtained a TPD loan discharge within the past three years, you will be

ineligible for Pell Grants. After three years, you are again eligible for Pell Grants.

On top of that, earning over a certain amount of income may cause the loans to be reinstated. Even in these cases, VR may still be able to assist you. Discuss your options with your counselor.

Q: I'm interested in a profession that requires a master's degree or professional degree. Can VR still help me?

Yes. Some professions require an advanced degree as a basic requirement of entry. When your employment goal requires this degree, VR can assist in the same way it would for any other degree.

Examples of professions requiring an advanced degree: teacher, social worker, attorney, or doctor.

Example: VR approved education services for a client who wanted to pursue an advanced degree in acupuncture medicine.

Support for an advanced degree, through an IPE, must be approved by the VR Administrator. For that reason, the approval process may take longer than it would for other degrees.

Q: Can VR also assist with shorter-term training programs or limited certifications?

Yes. Some certifications in Oregon only require short-term training or classes.

Examples of short-term training programs: Certifications

as a peer support specialist or personal care worker,
apprenticeships in many construction trades

You may be required to attend a one week-long training or several individual trainings to obtain these certifications. VR may be able to assist with both the cost of attendance and the cost of transportation to the trainings, if they are needed to obtain a certification related to an employment goal.

Q: Can VR pay for food and housing while I'm in school?

In most cases, no. Food and housing are considered the “cost of living” that you would incur whether or not you’re in school. As a general rule, VR cannot pay for “cost of living” expenses. In some cases, though, **VR may be able to assist with new or increased costs** associated with attending school.

Example: If moving to a new city in Oregon is required, then VR may be able to help with the one-time costs of moving and a security deposit.

Example: If attending classes requires a significant commute to school, VR may be able to help with the cost of transportation.

Q: VR has refused to support the training program or educational degree I've requested assistance with. What can I do?

Take these steps:

- If you haven't received the denial in writing, request a **formal written denial**.
- Next, attempt to resolve the issue with the **Branch Manager** of your local office.
- If that is unsuccessful, contact the **Client Assistance Program (CAP)**. CAP will review your case and see if an agreement can be reached with VR.
- You also have the right to **appeal the denial** by requesting an "Impartial Fair Hearing" within 60 days of when you received notice of the decision. More information is available here: <http://bit.ly/vrdisputeres>

YOUR RIGHT TO REGISTER TO VOTE

When you apply for or renew VR services, or change your address, VR should offer you a voter registration form at that time. You have the right to register to vote or update your voter registration at the VR office. This is a requirement of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993. It is meant to make it easier for people with disabilities to register to vote and maintain their voter registration. You can contact Disability Rights Oregon if you have any questions or concerns.

This information is available in alternate formats, including large print, Braille, audio format, or electronic text file.

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Disability Rights Oregon upholds the civil rights of people with disabilities to live, work, and engage in the community. The nonprofit works to transform systems, policies, and practices to give more people the opportunity to reach their full potential. For 40 years, the organization has served as Oregon's Protection & Advocacy system.

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