

Questions and Answers: A Faculty Guide to Accommodating Students with Disabilities

Q. Who is considered to be disabled in the eyes of the law?

A. A person with a disability includes any person who has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of the person's major life activities (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, hearing, seeing, walking, etc.). "Substantially" means that one's ability in a particular major life activity is significantly worse than that of the average person in the general population. The Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act protect the civil rights of individuals who are qualified to participate and have disabilities such as, but not limited to:

- Attention Deficit Disorders
- Blindness or low vision
- Cerebral palsy
- Chronic illnesses
- Deafness or hearing impairment
- Drug or alcohol addiction (only those in recovery programs and not currently using)
- Epilepsy or seizure disorders
- Learning Disability
- Orthopedic impairment
- Psychological or psychiatric disorders
- Speech disorders
- Spinal cord or traumatic brain injury
- Tourette's Syndrome

Q. What are the most common disabilities in college students?

A. The American Council on Education stated in its 1999 report on college freshmen with disabilities that about 9% of all full-time, first-time students report have disabilities. Of this number, 41% report having learning disabilities, 19.3% report having health-related disabilities, 13.3% report being partially sighted or blind, 11.6% report a hearing disability, 9.1 % report an orthopedic disability, 5.3% report a speech disability, and 21.8% report some other disability (the figures quoted exceed 100% because students could report more than one disability).

Q. What are learning disabilities?

A. Learning Disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of neurological disorders that interfere with an individual's ability to receive, process, store, retrieve, or produce information. These disorders create a gap between an individual's true capacity to learn and his or her productivity and performance. Learning disabilities can affect reading, spelling, written and spoken language, acquisition of foreign language, comprehension, mathematics ability, organizational skills, reasoning abilities, and social interaction. Learning disabilities occur in the presence of average or above average intelligence - the term is not synonymous with mental retardation.

Q. How can I recognize learning disabilities?

- A. Learning disabilities may be indicated when a student's performance is significantly lower in some area(s) than would be expected given his or her intelligence and ability in other areas. Some symptoms include pronounced difficulty in:
- Keeping letters and words in order when reading or writing
 - Dropping endings off words and omitting small "function" words (e.g., "if," "but," "so," "to") when reading or writing.
 - Sequencing ideas in logical fashion.
 - Expository as opposed to informal or narrative writing
 - Oral expression of ideas is significantly better than written expression
 - Comprehending what one has heard or read
 - Efficiently retrieving information from memory
 - Organization, time management skills
 - Understanding time and number concepts
 - Visual-spatial awareness, sense of direction
 - Maintaining consistent levels of performance
 - Accurately perceiving verbal and non-verbal social cues

Sometimes students with learning disabilities display poor attitudes towards learning and demonstrate self-defeating behaviors such as lateness to class, frequent absences, lack of participation in class, and a tendency to avoid rather than seek out help from professors. These behaviors are usually not the root of the problem in a student with a learning disability, but rather are maladaptive responses to the problem.

Q. What should I do when a student requests accommodations in my class?

- A. Ask the student for a letter of verification of disability from the Office of Disability Services that describes the accommodations needed for that class. You are encouraged to refrain from granting requests for accommodation by students who cannot present you with this letter, as you will not have any way of knowing whether or not the student actually needs such accommodation. It is the student's responsibility to obtain a letter of verification after providing acceptable documentation of disability to the ODS, and to deliver it to his/her professors. Take the time to engage the student in a discussion of his/her learning difficulties and to encourage him/her to seek your assistance when encountering difficulty with the class material.

Q. What should I tell students who do not have a letter from the Office of Disability Services?

- A. Simply refer them to Mrs. Anne Hohenwarter, Coordinator of Disability Services, upper level of Bishop Library, Room 5. Phone # is 6158. If the student has provided the ODS with acceptable documentation, she will prepare a letter of verification and accommodation.

Q. Will I be permitted to review the documentation of a student's disability?

- A. No, the ODS is legally bound to ensure that all information pertaining to a student's disability remains confidential, just as all medical information is confidential. Specific information about a student's disability may be shared with others only when

the student has signed a consent form which explicitly states with whom the information may be shared, or if the student signs a consent form that allows information to be shared with key administrators on a need-to-know basis.

Q. What if a student thinks he might have a learning disability but has never been tested?

- A. Refer the student to the ODS. An screening assessment will be conducted to determine the need for comprehensive diagnostic testing and an appropriate referral will be made to a professional qualified to render diagnoses of LD (or other possible disorder). The college does not conduct learning disabilities assessment. It is the responsibility of the student to procure and pay for such assessment.

Q. If I suspect that a student might have a learning disability, is it appropriate to share my observations and concerns with the student?

- A. Certainly. However, be sure to engage the student in conversation privately. Remember that students who are struggling academically may be defensive when queried about their difficulties, so try to set a tone of acceptance and genuine desire to help. You could tell the student that certain aspects of his/her performance on assignments or tests are similar to those of students with learning disabilities. Invite the student to consider whether it might be beneficial to set up an appointment with the ODS to explore the possibility of an undiagnosed learning disability, or other disorder that interferes with learning.

Q. Do reasonable accommodations mean lower standards for students with disabilities?

- A. No. By allowing reasonable accommodations, students with disabilities are afforded equal opportunity to access information and achieve the same high standards expected of all our students. Appropriate modifications to academic requirements simply remove discriminatory barriers, and allow the student to be evaluated in terms of his/her ability rather than disability. Although it is the responsibility of the ODS to determine what accommodations are needed to ensure access and minimize the impact of the disability, it is important that faculty members ensure that the proposed accommodations do not dilute the standards of the course. Faculty members with concerns about accommodations should not hesitate to discuss their concerns with the ODS. Frequently, successful provision of accommodation is the outcome of negotiation between student, professor, and the ODS.

Q. What are some accommodations I might be asked to provide in my class?

- A. Typical accommodations include:
- Extended (but not unlimited) time on tests
 - Distraction-reduced test environment
 - Audio-tape lectures
 - Peer note takers
 - Copies of overheads
 - Advance outline of lecture topics
 - Readers for exams

- Textbooks on tape (ODS will provide)
- Opportunities for oral demonstration of knowledge
- Scribes for essay exams
- Handouts and exams on certain color paper
- Handouts and exams in enlarged font
- No penalty for spelling/grammatical errors on in-class work
- Less frequent accommodations might include:
 - Alternative test formats
 - Use of FM listening devices (hard-of-hearing or ADHD students)
 - Interpreters (deaf students)
 - A table and chair rather than traditional desk
 - Opportunity to take a short break during the class

Q. How do I arrange for a distraction reduced test site or a proctor for the student?

- A.** The ODS will assist in making these arrangements. Tests can be proctored by paid student workers (upperclassmen in good academic standing) in the library's Independent Study Rooms. It is the student's responsibility to request this service at least a week in advance of the test date by contacting the ODS. The ODS will send professors an exam request form which should be completed and returned with a copy of the exam at least a day before the exam. The ODS delivers the completed exam to the professor within 24 hours.

Q. What should I do if the student does not wish to utilize the accommodations set forth in his or her letter of verification?

- A.** The student may choose not to use an accommodation at any time. However, it behooves faculty to document such instances, to protect themselves and the college in the event that a student files a complaint with the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) alleging that his or her need for accommodation has not been met. The ODS attaches a form to record such instances on the letter of verification the student presents to you each semester. You should keep such documentation on file for 180 days beyond the last day of class, as this is the time frame within which a complaint may be filed with OCR.

Q. What if I disagree with the accommodations described in the letter?

- A.** Making reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is mandated by federal law. However, the manner in which a student's needs are accommodated is negotiable. If you have a pedagogical disagreement with the appropriateness of an accommodation, call the Coordinator of Disability Services to discuss your concern. If an agreement cannot be reached, register your concern with the Vice President of Academic Affairs, whose decision on the matter will be final. If changes are made to the accommodations outlined in the letter of verification, a new one will be issued with the agreed upon changes.

Q. How can I make students with disabilities more comfortable in my class?

A. Include an accommodation statement in your course syllabi such as, "If you have a documented disability that requires accommodation, please let me know so that I can assist you." You could also make such an announcement orally the first day of class. Remember to protect the student's right to confidentiality by speaking to the student about his or her disability in your office rather than in the class or hallway. Refer to the article on etiquette when speaking to people with disabilities found on the ODS homepage.

Q. What considerations should I bear in mind when advising a student with a disability?

A. Remember that it is not permissible by law to counsel students with disabilities toward more restrictive careers than are recommended for non-disabled students, or away from an area of interest simply because of the disability. However, it is permissible, and certainly most ethical, to inform the students of the requirements of a profession and help them understand the difficulties they may encounter in a particular career that relate to their disability. For example, if a student has a learning disability in the area of mathematics (dyscalculia) and wishes to pursue a career in teaching, the student should be made aware that he/she will be expected to pass exams requiring solid math skills as part of the teacher certification process. It is also important that students with disabilities seek adjunctive academic advising from the ODS. Because students with disabilities frequently have priority registration as an accommodation, course schedules can be arranged that give them classes at peak learning times (e.g., a student taking morning medication for control of epilepsy may need to avoid early classes due to sedation), with adequate breaks between classes (e.g., a student with ADHD may need substantial "downtime" between classes to be able to regain focus.), and so on.