
Accommodations = Good Teaching: Strategies for Teaching College Students with Disabilities

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Abstract: *The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that faculty in all colleges and universities make reasonable accommodations in their courses for students with disabilities. But who defines “reasonable” and what do these accommodations have to look like? This article will show how using evidence-based practices in teaching adults often will meet the needs of students with disabilities, and what faculty can do when slightly more support is needed.*

Keywords: *college students, disabilities, accommodations*

Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, there has been a steady growth of the numbers of students with disabilities enrolling in postsecondary education. Recent studies have shown an increase of greater than 20% in enrollment of students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions from 2003 to 2009 (National Council on Disability; Raue & Lewis, 2011). While better transition preparation at the high school level may account for higher numbers of students with learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities continuing their education, we also have a generation of military veterans returning home from a decade of war, ready to attend college. It is estimated that approximately 1.4 million service members are preparing to leave the armed forces within the next few years, and many of these may have experienced physical injury or traumatic brain injury while in service or may be experiencing the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental health disorders (Tolbert, 2012). For faculty members who do not have previous training on working with individuals with disabilities, the idea of teaching course content to these individuals may be daunting, and faculty may not be aware of exactly what their responsibilities are to make accommodations for the needs of those students. In this *Teaching Tips* column, I will briefly share the legalities behind accommodations and some general ways faculty members may make accommodations to meet their needs of all their students.

LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF FACULTY TO MAKE ACCOMMODATIONS

The primary legislation that mandates accommodations for students with disabilities is the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990). An individual with a disability is defined by the Act as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that “substantially limits” one or more major life activities, a person who has a record of such an impairment, or a person who is regarded as having such an impairment. While that may seem wide open for interpretation, luckily for faculty members, students with disabilities are evaluated and determined to qualify for services by an entity such as a disability support services center or private physicians or mental health

providers. Every college has an office designated to serve as the clearinghouse for documenting students' disabilities and determining appropriate accommodations. They will then usually provide students with documentation to take to their professors.

When students are in preK-12 educational settings, federal law (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, first passed as P.L. 94-142 in 1975) mandates that school districts identify and serve all students with disabilities within their district. However, once students enter postsecondary education, the responsibility for identification falls upon the student. Students must "self-disclose"; in other words, they must choose to go to individual faculty members and identify themselves as a student with a disability and in need of accommodations. Their parents should not contact professors and the disability resources center on campus will not inform faculty that they have a student with a disability on their class roster. The student must approach the faculty member and request the needed accommodations. Accommodations are not meant to change your course expectations or grading standards. Reasonable accommodations are meant to provide opportunities for students with disabilities to demonstrate they can achieve the same outcomes as students without disabilities. A good analogy for thinking about accommodation is one recounted by Zantal-Wiener (2008); just as eyeglasses don't change an individual's eyes, they only make it possible for the individual to see better, accommodations don't change a course, they only make it possible for an individual with a disability to better demonstrate their knowledge of the course.

If a student does not self-disclose a disability, yet a faculty member suspects the student may have a disability, what is that faculty member required to do? Since self-disclosure is key to receiving services as an adult, the faculty member is not *required* to take any action. However, as a professional educator, there are several steps he or she *should* take. First, contact the disability services office on campus and explain his concerns. He should not expect confirmation or denial of the student's disability status from the office, even if they are aware of it. They will also most likely inform the faculty member that it is illegal for him to directly ask the student if he or she has a disability. Based on the issues he identifies, however, they may be able to provide a list of suggestions for working with the student. Next, the faculty member can meet with the student privately about his concerns, focusing on the student's strengths and abilities and the faculty member's desire to see the student reach his or her full potential, but not directly addressing disability status. If the student expresses concern about their skills or learning ability or the possibility of a disability, the faculty member can suggest the student contact the disability services office to explore options. Finally, if the student does not seem to respond, the faculty member should continue working with the student, using good teaching strategies that can make course material accessible by all students. Even if the student is not yet ready to self-disclose or examine the possibility that a disability exists, an open and accepting conversation with a faculty member may make them more open to working with disability services in the future.

REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS IN COLLEGE COURSES

Many times, faculty members will say, "I can't make accommodations because I don't know anything about (learning disabilities, autism, brain injuries, etc.)!" However, as Hodge and Preston-Sabin pointed out (1997), faculty members don't need to know the specifics about all disability categories and characteristics if they just follow some key principles of good undergraduate teaching. In general, they state that good practice: 1) encourages student-faculty contact, 2) encourages cooperation among students, 3) encourages active learning, 4) gives prompt feedback, 5) emphasizes time on task, 6) communicates high expectations, and 7) respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Law mandates reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities, and when faculty provides them to students, they can help ease feelings of stigma or discrimination students with disabilities may feel. Reasonable accommodations can best be defined as:

a modification or adjustment to a course, program, service, job, activity, assessment, test, or facility that enables a qualified individual with a disability to have an equal opportunity to attain the same level of performance or to enjoy the same benefits and privileges that are available to an individual without a disability (Zantal-Wiener, 2008, "What are accommodations?").

Accommodations can be considered in two large categories: instructional or classroom accommodations and modifications or test-taking accommodations and modifications. These accommodations are not designed to reduce academic requirements or lower a faculty member's expectations for students, they only serve to lessen the impact the disability may have on the student to either access the course material or demonstrate understanding of material. Classroom accommodations can include the use of note takers, allowing students to tape lectures, preferential seating in the classroom, or enlarged copies of handouts or other printed materials. If a faculty member uses PowerPoint or Keynote in his or her lecture, simply making sure those are provided in advance to students can make the lecture material more accessible. Find out from students if they would prefer to have them in slide format or notes format where they can add notes to themselves as you lecture. Test-taking accommodations can include additional time on tests, alternative testing methods (such as demonstrating mastery through presentations or papers), a quiet environment for testing, or more frequent testing so that the student can get more frequent feedback on course progress.

Another way faculty members can build consideration for students with disabilities into their class is through course design. Look at your course requirements and evaluation procedures, and how you allocate points in your course. Make sure that you allow multiple methods for students to display course mastery and earn grades, through the use of in-class activities, papers, presentations, and tests. Having all scores or the majority of scores coming from one method of academic performance output assumes that all students can demonstrate proficiency through the same format. Upload text and materials to a course management system such as BlackBoard in order to allow students to have advance access to materials. Utilize the calendar tools within those systems to allow students to have adequate time to plan for upcoming assignments and activities, especially in conjunction with requirements from other courses they may be taking. Provide a clear syllabus on the first day, and maintain your schedule and due dates as much as possible. Again, this allows students to better self-manage time and expectations.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR ACCOMMODATIONS

If faculty are still unsure of how to make appropriate accommodations for specific students, there are a number of places they can go for additional ideas and materials. A few that may be particularly useful:

- *Fast Facts for Faculty* (from The Ohio State University) - available at <http://ada.osu.edu/resources/fastfacts/index.htm>, these are information briefs on a variety of topics, including disability-specific information, how to coordinate internships for students with disabilities, and creating web-accessible content. Faculty can find a number of online training modules as well as publications about working with college students with disabilities.

- *Heath Resource Center* – located at <http://www.heath.gwu.edu>, this is an online clearinghouse of information on postsecondary education for students with disabilities and is a component of the National Youth Transitions Center.
- *The Faculty Room* – an online knowledge base for faculty and administrators located at <http://www.washington.edu/doi/Faculty/>, this site developed by University of Washington will help faculty design classroom environments and activities that are accessible for all students.
- *Disabled Students' Program* – this page from University of California at Berkeley provides general suggestions for teaching students with disabilities as well as specific tips for different disability categories (a good resource for faculty who are looking for more information on a specific disability) and can be found at <http://dsp.berkeley.edu/teachstudentswithdisab.html#5>

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