

# Accommodating Students with Disabilities in Post-secondary Education Settings

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# Introduction

Students with disabilities in post-secondary institutions sometimes face barriers to accessing education. Creating a learning environment that is inclusive and equitable is the responsibility of all students, faculty and staff.

## PRESENTATION TOPICS:

- ▶ Appropriate disability etiquette and language
- ▶ Legal basis for disability services
- ▶ Role of the Disability Services (DS) office
- ▶ Types of support services for students w/disabilities

# Definition of Disability

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a **disability** is defined as:

**...a long-lasting physical, cognitive, or psychological condition**

**...that substantially impairs a persons ability  
...to perform major life activities without assistance.**

- ▶ Major life activities may include, but are not limited to: self-care, seeing, hearing, walking, speaking, learning, working, thinking, concentrating, and interacting with others.

# Definition of Disability *(cont'd)*

- ▶ Whether the impact of a disability rises to the level of “substantial impairment” is a determination made by a qualified clinician/evaluator.
- ▶ The specific nature of a disability and how it impacts the individual diagnosed with it can vary greatly, even if the name of the disability is the same.

**To learn more about the ADA and what it means for people with disabilities, take a look at this ADA video gallery from the feds:**  
**<https://www.ada.gov/videogallery.htm>**



# *Activity: Defining Disability*

☞ Read the list of items below and indicate whether they are likely to fall under the ADA definition of disability:

Deafness  
Dyslexia  
Blindness  
Pregnancy  
Major Depression  
Sprained ankle  
Diabetes  
Influenza  
Cerebral Palsy  
Broken Arm  
Multiple Sclerosis  
Traumatic Brain Injury

☞ ***OPEN/GROUP QUESTION:*** What disability/ies do you think are most prevalent in U.S. colleges (may not be listed above)?

# *ACTIVITY ANSWERS: Defining Disability*

👉 Read the list of items below and indicate whether they are likely to fall under the ADA definition of disability:

**Deafness** – YES!

**Dyslexia** – YES!

**Blindness** – YES!

Pregnancy – no

**Major Depression** – YES!

Sprained ankle – no

**Diabetes** – MAYBE!

Influenza – no

**Cerebral Palsy** – YES!

Broken Arm – no

**Multiple Sclerosis** – YES!

**Traumatic Brain Injury** – YES!

👉 **OPEN/GROUP QUESTION:** What disability/ies do you think are the most prevalent in college settings (may not be listed above)?

👉 **ANSWERS:** Learning Disabilities, ADD/ADHD, & Psychiatric Disabilities

# Disability Stats in College Settings

- ▶ Almost 1 / 2 of graduating U.S. high school students with disabilities will go on to pursue higher education goals<sup>1</sup>.
- ▶ Currently, 11–14% of the U.S. college population has one or more disabilities documented at their school, 3x higher than 20 years ago<sup>1,2</sup>.
- ▶ Between the disability categories, undergraduate students with Learning Disabilities (LD) and/or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) comprise the largest group (51%) seeking disability services in college<sup>3</sup>.
- ▶ Compared to the previous generation, the proportion of 6–21 year olds with LD and/or ADHD increased from 3.6% to 5.6%, so institutions of higher learning will experience an influx of students enrolling with these diagnoses over the next few years<sup>4</sup>.
  - Proportion of students with autism has also increased from .5% to 1%.
  - Proportion of hearing (.1%), vision (.1%), mobility (.1%), & speech–language (3%) diagnoses have remained relatively consistent while mental retardation diagnoses have decreased from 2% to 1%.

1. U. S. Dept of Education, Office of Special Education Programs; 2010

2. The Learning House; 2006

3. The Pope Center for Higher Education Policy; 2010

4. U.S. Dept of Education, Nat'l Ctr on Education Statistics; 1976–2010

# Basic Etiquette & Language

Addressing disability for the first time may not be the most comfortable situation for some people (even those who have their own disabilities). These general tips can help to guide your communication and interactions:

1. Use person-centered language (i.e. “person with autism”, not “autistic person”).
2. Try to stay alert of architectural barriers in the path of individuals with blindness and mobility impairments.
3. Respect individual privacy. Discuss disability-related matters when others are not around to overhear.
4. Use the same eye contact and other respectful non-verbals that you would use with anyone else.
5. Don't be afraid to ask the person w/ the disability if and how you can assist them.



# *Activity: Etiquette & Language*

Read each statement below and determine whether it is True or False:

Statement #1: When I meet someone with a disability, I should never ask them about their disability.

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...#2: I should not touch someone's powerchair or guide dog.

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...#3: When a person has a sign language interpreter or an aide with them, I should talk directly to the sign language interpreter or aide. The person with the disability won't understand me.

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# *ACTIVITY ANSWERS: Etiquette & Language*

...#1: When I meet someone with a disability, I should never ask them about their disability.

- ▶ For personal privacy as well as legal reasons, it is generally NOT a good idea to ask about the existence of a disability to someone who has not disclosed that to you. Even after disclosure, the focus should be on how you can assist the person more so than the nature and details of their disability. At the university, students who openly disclose to you should be directed to the appropriate campus office for assistance.

...#2: I should not touch someone's powerchair or an animal guide.

- ▶ Do not automatically hold onto a person's wheelchair or play with their service animal. Consider these auxiliary elements as a part of that person's body space. If the person appears to require assistance, offer but do not force your "help". In an emergency situation on campus, please contact the Campus Security office immediately.

...#3: When a person has a sign language interpreter or an aide with them, I should talk directly to the sign language interpreter or aide. The person with the disability probably won't understand me.

- ▶ Speak directly to the person conducting business with you, not the third party that is assisting them.

# Disability Services (DS) Office

Disability Services (DS) is charged with ensuring that admissions, academic programs, support services, student activities, and campus facilities are accessible to and usable by students who have disclosed documented disabilities. This includes:

- ▶ Determining eligibility for services & specific accommodations through review of documentation and assessment of individual student needs
- ▶ Providing adaptive technology to students & training them on usage
- ▶ Scheduling sign language interpreters, note-takers, scribes & readers
- ▶ Consulting with faculty & staff on accommodation administration & disability-related topics
- ▶ Arranging appropriate campus housing & building access
- ▶ Connecting students with relevant state & community resources
- ▶ Teaching self-advocacy skills & explaining disability rights to students
- ▶ Educating the campus community about disability issues

# Legal Basis

*The University readily operates under the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act. The major legislative message is:*

- ▶ No (otherwise) **qualified** person with a disability shall be denied a benefit, opportunity, or participation in any program receiving Federal dollars solely on the basis of that disability.
- This is why disability status cannot be requested from applicants during the college admissions process!

# Legal Basis *(cont'd)*

- An individual with a disability is qualified if, **with or without reasonable academic adjustments**, they meet the same eligibility, conduct, and achievement standards expected of other students.
  - A reasonable academic adjustment (commonly referred to as an *accommodation*) should “level the playing field”. Under or over-accommodating a student often results in putting that student or other students at a disadvantage. It also carries legal risks.

# Determining “Reasonable”

- ▶ An accommodation may be considered reasonable if it alters curriculum delivery and evaluation methods **without** altering basic content or curriculum. It cannot:
  - 1) Place undue financial or administrative burden on the institution.
  - 2) Disrupt the ability of other students to learn in a safe and stable environment.
  - 3) Substantially alter an essential element of the academic curriculum.

# Determining “Reasonable” *(cont’d)*

The examples below are general and are not intended to be definite or universal. The determination of reasonableness can vary based on the student’s disability & the specific course of study.

## Likely Reasonable

Use of an audio recorder to capture lecture material

Sign language interpreters

Written materials converted to Braille

Additional time to complete in-class exams

Alternative means of assessing class participation level

Changing a class location to ground level

## Likely Unreasonable

Use of a “talking dictionary” during lecture

Excessive or indefinite leave of absence from class

Reduction/elimination of assignments from course syllabus

Essential course requirement substitutions for a given major

Retroactive accommodation requests

# Requesting Accommodations

In order for students to receive any academic accommodations, they must follow DS office registration procedures (this is process may vary somewhat between academic institutions):

1. Obtain Disability Documentation (i.e. psych eval, audiological exam)
2. Participate in an Intake Meeting w/DS office
  - a) History & Documentation Review
  - b) Needs Assessment
  - c) Read & Sign “DS Service Agreement”

# Accommodation Letters

**After following the registration procedures, students are given an “Accommodation Letter” to discuss and sign with each instructor.**

- ▶ This letter lists the accommodations that the student is approved to request from their instructors that semester.
- ▶ Students must be self-directed and initiate ongoing discussion and planning with their instructors.
- ▶ Students are not required to use all (or any) of their accommodations, but the institution cannot be held responsible if the student declines or does not seek services.
- ▶ Some of the accommodations on the letter are to be provided by the instructor and others by Disability Services (DS).

# Accommodation Letters *(cont'd)*

## Some commonly requested accommodations:

- Extended time on exams
- Alternate testing location
  - Copies of class notes
- Accessible classroom location
- Course materials in an alternative format
- Sign language interpreter (provided by DS office)
- Use of adaptive technology (owned by student or provided by DS office)

# Accommodation Examples

## Extended Time on Exams

- ▶ Students with this accommodation are allowed up to twice as much time as other students to complete an in-class exam. For a variety of reasons, these students require more time to demonstrate their content knowledge.

*Example.* Learning Disability → delayed reading speed

*Ex.* Cerebral Palsy → writing at slower pace

*Ex.* Executive Functioning Disorder → longer time to process info

## Use of Adaptive Technology

- ▶ Students with approval to use adaptive technology available on campus may be allowed to use a variety of materials and software to decrease multiple barriers to learning.

*Ex.* Carpel Tunnel → difficulty typing (Dragon NaturallySpeaking)

*Ex.* Dyslexia → numerous reading errors (Kurzweil 3000)

*Ex.* Deafness → unaware of audio alarms (AlertMaster for dorm)

# More on Assistive Technology (AT)

Assistive (also called *adaptive*) technology, or simply “AT”, is technology used by individuals with disabilities in order to perform functions that might otherwise be difficult or impossible.

It can include mobility devices such as walkers and wheelchairs, as well as hardware, software, and peripherals that assist people with disabilities in accessing computers or other information technologies.

**For more information on Assistive Technology**, check out this close-captioned video from the PACER Simon Technology Center:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DB9pKkZoJDc>

# More on Assistive Technology (AT) *(cont'd)*

## Some examples of AT:

- people with limited hand function may use a keyboard with large keys or a special mouse to operate a computer
- people who are blind may use software that reads text on the screen in a computer-generated voice
- people with low vision may use software that enlarges screen content
- people who are deaf may use a TTY (text telephone)
- people with speech impairments may use a device that speaks out loud as they enter text via a keyboard.

# Additional Points for Staff

- Though the law allows legitimate educationally-based discussion between instructor, DS, and school officials regarding a student's accommodations, the specific nature of a student's disability is shared on a limited, "need to know" basis (FERPA). Medical records cannot be released by DS without the student's consent.
  - The disability-related information that you are provided by the student or DS office cannot be shared with other staff, instructors, students, or any individuals outside of the school.
- Model appropriate language & behavior towards students with disabilities. Your actions and attitudes have an impact on the campus atmosphere.
- Remember that students with disabilities sometimes avoid identifying themselves out of fear of being labeled and judged. Promoting a comfortable, accepting environment can help to draw these students out and get them to the services they need.

# Additional Points for Staff *(cont'd)*

- Allow students (and other classroom visitors, like guest speakers) with service animals everywhere on campus, including the classroom.
- Encourage students who disclose their disability to seek support services.
- Implement accommodations as agreed and inform DS of any anticipated difficulties with implementation.
- Although the DS office is the primary office overseeing student's disability-related access and accommodation needs, **everyone at the university has an impact on the quality of services that are provided to these students, including those working in admissions, advising, residential and any other capacity involving direct student contact.**

# Informative Resources

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) / ADA.gov

<http://www.ada.gov/>

U.S. Dept. of Education, Office for Civil Rights (OCR):  
Preparing Students with Disabilities for Post-Secondary  
Education (PSE)

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html>

Pacer Center Q&A on How Sect. 504 & ADA Impact PSE

<http://www.pacer.org/publications/adaqa/504.asp>

Family Educational Rights & Privacy Act (FERPA)

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>