Teaching Students with Disabilities: A Proactive Approach

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Perhaps you have found yourself in the midst of a conflict like one I faced in my introductory psychology class. A student with a documented disability e-mailed me on the day the required, five-page research paper was due. She said that, because her accommodations letter required that I provide her with extra time to complete written assignments, she would be submitting her paper late. How could I reconcile her request for extra time with my policies regarding late work? The conflict was ultimately resolved with the help of the head of my college’s office for students with disabilities, but it left me regretting that I had not addressed the issue at the beginning of the semester. Such situations underscore the need for making preparations for serving students with disabilities.

1. Learn More About Students with Disabilities
The process of developing a general set of strategies for accommodating students with disabilities should begin with becoming better informed. First, it is helpful to know how the law distinguishes among instructor, institutional, and student responsibilities. Further, it is important to understand that the catch-all term “disabilities” can include conditions ranging from physical limitations such as confinement to a wheelchair, to cognitive impairments like ADHD, to psychiatric disabilities such as bipolar disorder, or to students with chronic medical conditions (e.g., diabetes) as well as those who are recovering from substance abuse. Obviously, the kinds of accommodations faculty must provide to a given student depend to some degree on that student’s disability. Thus, it is difficult to anticipate every accommodation that may arise. The reference list at the end of this column includes several Internet sources that can help you become more familiar with both the legal and the practical issues associated with teaching students with disabilities.

Just as general student characteristics vary across colleges, one school’s population of students with disabilities may be quite different from another’s. The location of a given college, the availability of accessible housing, or a particular degree program may cause a school to attract more students of one disability group than another. Your institution’s office for students with disabilities can acquaint you with the characteristics of your college’s population of students with disabilities as well as the kinds of accommodations you will be expected to provide for them. Colleagues can probably also provide a wealth of information that is specific to your institution regarding student characteristics and the logistics involved in working with your institution’s disabilities services staff.

2. Familiarize Yourself with the Services and Policies of Your College
Like student characteristics, the strategies colleges use to implement the disability law requirements vary across institutions. For instance, the most common accommodation for students with disabilities across all colleges in the United States is extended testing time (Ofiesh, Mather, & Russell, 2005). However, some schools require professors to provide both a setting and a proctor for students who need extended testing time; at others, disability offices provide these services. Thus, it is a good idea to meet with the director of services for students with disabilities on your campus to address this and other issues:
• Extended testing time. If the disabilities staff are responsible for administering extended-time exams, find out how and by whom the exams will be handled. If you have any doubts about the security of the process, you may decide that you will be better off proctoring the exam yourself.

• Distraction-free locations and proctoring. If your college requires you to provide these, identify an appropriate place in advance and find a time when you or someone in your department can serve as a proctor. Ideally, the student should take the exam at the same time as others in his or her class. If you do the proctoring yourself, one solution is to administer the test to the student immediately before or after class.

• Accessibility of campus resources and services. Ask whether the school has a dedicated computer lab for students with disabilities. If not, find out whether it has taken steps to ensure that there are accessible computers in all or some of the institution’s labs. You also should find out whether the office for students with disabilities provides tutoring for specific classes or tasks such as writing research papers.

• Academic advising. Find out whether the staff provides students with academic advising. If so, tell staff your thoughts about enrolling such students in psychology classes. For instance, you might suggest that students enroll in small rather than large sections of introductory psychology. You might also provide guidance as to how the reading demands of introductory psychology might be balanced with the demands of other courses.

• Personal attendants. What are your institution’s policies regarding personal attendants? In most cases, attendants support students’ physical needs and should not be present in the classroom unless absolutely necessary. Some colleges specifically forbid attendants from being present during testing, but others decide on a case-by-case basis. The primary goal of an attendant policy is to ensure that the student’s work is his or her own, and to respect the rights of other students in the class. Thus, if an attendant attends class, it needs to be clear that he or she must remain in the classroom for the entire class session and abide by policies regarding the use of cell phones and other behaviors that may disturb students.

3. Examine and Improve the Accessibility of Your Course
Armed with a body of relevant knowledge, you are ready to examine and, if needed, improve the accessibility of your course.

• Develop your own policies for students with disabilities and incorporate them into your syllabus. Most colleges require that professors incorporate a brief “ADA” paragraph stating that students must be registered with the school’s office for students with disabilities in order to receive accommodations. Build your own policies on your college’s generic disability statement. For example, state that students must notify you of their accommodation needs as early in the semester as possible.

• Examine your testing and assignment procedures. If you give online exams, for example, you may have to provide an alternative testing format for students with disabilities. Similarly, machine-scored answer sheets may present problems for some students. As noted earlier, many students with disabilities require extra time for testing. Consider how you might adjust your normal testing procedures. For instance, you might give more frequent, but shorter, exams, and allot twice as much time as you know most students will require to accommodate students whose only testing modification is extended time.

Extra time also is an issue for written assignments. Choose due dates that allow you to extend
deadlines for students with disabilities and still get their work in by the end of the semester. I shifted the research paper due date in my introductory psychology course from the 14th to the 10th week of the semester for this reason. (I also shortened the required length from 10 to five pages in light of the reduced amount of time available for students without disabilities.)

- Give some thought to transportation issues, particularly if you teach at a commuter school. Many students with disabilities, especially those with motor and visual impairments, rely on transportation arrangements that are less flexible than those of students who have their own cars. Course requirements may need to be modified accordingly. For instance, it might be extremely difficult for students with disabilities to participate in a study group or a group research project. Similarly, an extra credit opportunity involving volunteer work might be impossible for one of these students to accomplish.

- Examine any online course components and other kinds of instructional media from the perspective of a student who has a visual or hearing impairment. IT departments are generally responsible for ensuring that the platforms they use (e.g., Blackboard, WebCT) are accessible. In addition, they often provide information about how to incorporate the accessibility features of these platforms into online course content. To a great extent, though, the needs of students with disabilities can be met by providing online information in alternative formats such as printed syllabi. However, some kinds of information cannot be adequately represented in an alternative form. For instance, an animation of the action potential can be described in text, but certain aspects of the animation probably cannot be well represented in words. In such cases, the professor’s responsibility is to ensure that the student with a disability has an equal opportunity to learn the required information, not to come up with an equivalent presentation (Johnson & Brown, 2003).

4. Meet with Students at the Beginning of the Semester
Consider requiring students with accommodations letters to meet with you to work out how their needs will be met in your class. It is a good idea to create a set of standard procedures for these meetings. Write down the points you want to make about student responsibilities and the questions you need answered. (Remember, the nature of the disabling condition is confidential, so do not ask about that.) You might begin the meeting by chatting a bit to develop rapport. Make it a point to explore the transportation issues alluded to earlier. Move on to the accommodations letter and seek clarification of any items that are unclear. For instance, if the student has a visual impairment that requires sitting near the front of the room, find out how close the student needs to be. Accommodations letters often say “as needed,” so you should clarify practical issues surrounding the student’s responsibility to let you know when accommodation is needed. It also is a good idea to find out the name, telephone number, and e-mail address for the student’s contact person in the office for students with disabilities.

5. Alternative Materials
Many students with visual impairments and learning disabilities use alternative texts. To speed up the process of getting these materials to your future students with disabilities, contact your publisher’s sales representative to find out whether such materials have been prepared and how students can get them. Many publishers have plain text files of textbooks on CD-ROM disks that can be converted to speech by special computer software (often provided to students by state agencies). Similarly, many textbooks have been recorded by Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic (www.rfbd.org). At their website, you can search for your textbook and find out how your students can order it, if it is available. Pass along the
information you get to the students, then advise them that obtaining the required course materials is their responsibility. You should probably also point out that there may be a delay in getting the alternative text and that the student will be responsible for keeping up with assignments.

If alternative materials are not available, the disabilities office may arrange for the text to be tape recorded by their staff, especially for students with visual impairments or who are completely dyslexic. For students with other kinds of learning disabilities, the disabilities office may advise you to allow extra time to complete reading assignments. This advice naturally raises the issue of the reasonableness of expecting the student to complete the course in a single semester. In my view, spending a little time investigating the availability of alternative materials is preferable to negotiating an extension of course length. In fact, when choosing textbooks and other materials, it is a good idea to consider availability of alternative materials.

6. The Student’s Ability to Benefit from Class Lectures
If the student is hearing-impaired, you need to find out whether she reads lips or will be accompanied by an interpreter. Advise the student that she may need to remind you to talk in her direction if she reads lips. If the college is providing an interpreter, talk to this person about how issues such as signing difficult terms will be handled.

7. Tape Recording Lectures
Many professors give permission to students with disabilities to tape record their lectures in order to address a “needs help with note-taking” accommodation. If you do so, include a tape-recording policy in your syllabus that applies to all students, stating that students who tape must respect others’ privacy and not disrupt class to change batteries or tapes. It also is a good idea to obtain permission from all students in the class before you or anyone else tapes a class session. Students’ comments and questions might be considered part of their confidential educational record. Further, it may be illegal in your state to record people’s statements without permission.

8. Typed Lecture Notes and Pre-Recorded Lectures
If you do not want class sessions recorded, consider preparing typed lecture notes for students with disabilities. Save these files in plain text format so they can be converted to speech by the computer software mentioned above. You also might consider making your own recordings. One of my colleagues has created MP3 files of his lectures that all students can download from the course homepage. He provides the files on CDs if students do not have an MP3 player or the hardware to burn their own CDs. Although this approach is quite time-consuming, the hassle-reduction advantages become clear when a student presents you with an accommodation letter that requires help with note-taking and you simply hand him or her a few CDs or pages of printed notes. There may be media services personnel at your college who can help with this task. If you are concerned about commercial misuse of such aids, tag the notes or audio files with copyright notices stating that they cannot be reproduced without your permission and are provided solely for the purpose of personal study. (See http://ethics.csc.ncsu.edu/intellectual/classnotes/ for links to articles about intellectual property issues associated with professors’ lecture notes.)

9. When Prepared Notes and Taped Lectures Are Insufficient
When I teach statistics, I work problems on the chalkboard that I have prepared in advance and could include in typed notes. However, I often work problems in response to students’ questions. Students
whose disability prevents them from following what I am doing on the chalkboard will miss a substantial proportion of the instruction even if they record the session. Last semester, after each class, I met with a statistics student who had limited vision. I guided her in copying critical problems from the board and, essentially, re-taught each one as she copied it.

A surrogate note-taker for the student with a disability also works. You might ask another student in the class to volunteer, but what happens if the note-taker is absent? Moreover, how do you know at the beginning of the semester which students will be good note-takers? Logistical issues surround the necessity of copying the note-taker’s notes. The best solution is to solicit help from the office for students with disabilities. It may have funds to hire a note-taker. This is how my own daughter, who is legally blind, managed undergraduate math classes. The state agency that serves the visually impaired paid a note-taker to accompany her to every class. She was required to find the note-taker and to complete all necessary documentation for the agency. Her professors’ only responsibility was to grant permission for the note-taker to attend classes.

10. Testing Issues
Try to establish the testing procedure for students with disabilities in the most concrete terms possible. Even if students take their exams in the disabilities office, most instructors and disability services professionals insist that students take exams at the same time as their classmates; tell the student so in unequivocal terms. This is especially important if you have a “no make-up exam” policy. If you do not establish a specific time when students are supposed to take an exam, you risk sending students the implicit message that they can take the exam at a time of their choosing, giving them a distinct advantage over their classmates, which is not consistent with either the letter or the spirit of disability law.

11. Extended Deadlines for Written Assignments
Accommodations letters often operationally define “extra time.” They may say students should get 50 percent more time, or twice as much, or something of this kind. However, such accommodations are typically developed with testing in mind, not written work for which all students have an extended period of time. Consequently, deadlines for such assignments have to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis. If you cannot come to an agreement, consult with the director of the disabilities office regarding a reasonable deadline.

12. Falling Behind and Concerns about Course Performance and Grades
Tell students about any available tutoring services for your course and any services to help with essays or research papers. However, keep in mind the “barriers” principle. As long as standard tutoring services are accessible to students with disabilities, there is no need to provide tutoring or help beyond that you would provide for any student. Still, you should emphasize your belief that, given sufficient effort, most students can do well in your course. Of course, you may want to operationally define “doing well.” I do this for all students at the beginning of each semester by talking about the factors that predict their grades. If a student faces a specific obstacle that is somewhat beyond her control, then she must compensate by manipulating another factor that is in her control. For instance, one uncontrollable factor for many of my students is that English is not their primary language. By contrast, the decision to take introductory psychology either before or after they have completed their required ESL courses is within their control. Likewise, the amount of time they devote to studying and the degree to which they access tutoring services is up to them. Thus, a non-native English speaking student who has not completed the
ESL sequence and who has little time for studying or tutoring should adjust her grade expectations downward. In this way, I communicate to students that, although I enthusiastically support their achievement goals, I also advocate realistic expectations. In conversations with students who have disabilities, I emphasize my willingness to do everything possible to ensure that the outcome they experience in my course will be a product of their own ability and effort.

13. Require Students to Sign a Contract

You might be wise to require students with disabilities to sign a “learning contract” that specifies both instructor and student responsibilities. Many college offices for students with disabilities require these students to sign contracts in their office that outline the responsibilities of the student and staff in the disability office. They also state procedures students must follow when they have a complaint or need to have an accommodation modified. A similar contract involving a student and a professor would specify how any testing accommodations would be implemented and specify due dates for written assignments. If I had entered into such a contract with the student I described in my opening paragraph, it would have included a date on which the research paper was due. After that date, the no-late-work policy in my syllabus would have applied.

Benefits of a Proactive Approach

There is little doubt that providing accommodations for students with disabilities can add frustration and stress to teaching. When I received the “extra time” e-mail I described at the opening of this column, I felt that I was being taken advantage of. I had only myself to blame, though, because I should have addressed the paper deadline at the beginning of the semester.

Anyone teaching in today’s higher-education environment will face making such accommodations. A relatively small investment of time can greatly reduce stress when accommodation needs arise. That is, if we professors have acquired relevant information and considered the process of adapting our courses for students with various kinds of disabilities, then we will be less likely to feel exploited or ineffectual. Instead, we can focus our energies on helping students with and without disabilities achieve an understanding of their own and others’ behavior.

References and Recommended Reading


