

## Guest Editor: Kerry H. Wynn, Southeast Missouri State University



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They can come in many ways. They can come through campus mail. They can come by e-mail. They can be handed to you by a student. They can come in many different ways in many different institutions, but their coming is inevitable. The first encounter with the notification that you will have a student with a disability in class can cause a jolt of panic. For many, the 21st such notification still causes a jolt of panic. How much additional work will this mean? Will I have to compromise the integrity of my course? I am clueless about disabilities!

Remember that you are not alone. Accommodating students with disabilities is a three-party team effort: the student is the expert on their experience with disability; you are the expert on your course; and the disabled student services personnel provide expertise on how to bridge the gap between your course and your student's learning potential. Depending on the size of your institution, this third party may range in size from a multistaff unit to a faculty member who has taken on the responsibility of learning how to accommodate students with disabilities. Whoever has this responsibility should obtain the proper education on disability law, disability documentation and interpretation, and the appropriate accommodations for particular disabilities.

Disabled student service staff are your friends. They provide the expertise to collect and interpret documentation, to identify diagnoses and the appropriate accommodations, and to note what is required and not required under disability law so that faculty members do not have

to determine these issues for themselves. Professionals in Disabled Student Services (DSS) are as committed as faculty to insuring that academic integrity is not compromised. They know that to compromise academic rigor is to compromise the student's education. Their job is to make sure that students with disabilities have access to the same quality of education as that received by nondisabled students. DSS professionals do not try to guarantee success for students with disabilities — they try to make sure that students with disabilities have equal access to opportunities for both success and failure.

All three partners should be involved in the accommodation process. You should know who is responsible for DSS on your campus. If a student comes to you with a request for accommodation that is not documented by the DSS staff, you should refer the student to DSS to register for services. The student will be required to provide the appropriate documentation from the appropriate diagnostic professionals to verify the disability. This is in compliance with disability law and insures that there is an actual disability and that the accommodations given are appropriate without compromising your course.

The minimal involvement by the three partners would entail what we might call the “cookbook” approach to accommodation. In this scenario the student provides documentation and registers with DSS, which then determines what the standard accommodations for the disability are in order to meet the student's needs while insuring compliance with disability law. The faculty member is then provided with a list of these accommodations, which he or she can then use as a checklist to insure that they have met their legal obligations. DSS will probably not include a diagnosis with this notification since the list should provide sufficient information for the faculty member to accommodate the student. Learning disabilities may require that a student be provided a note-taker for lectures and a reader and extended time for an exam. Attention Deficit Disorder may require that a student be given extended time on exams in a solitary environment. A visually impaired student may require enlarged or taped tests or readers and scribes for exams. There should always be a conversation between the faculty member and the student as to how these accommodations will be provided.

DSS should provide special seating arrangements, sign language interpreters, real time transcription (CART), or other services in the classroom. The faculty may be expected to notify the DSS staff when these services fail to function appropriately. There are services outside the classroom for which the faculty may not receive notification. These include taped or electronic textbooks, assistive technology, and accessible housing and library facilities.

The provision of other services may vary from institution to institution. Some institutions will provide readers, scribes, and proctors for exams through DSS or centralized testing services.

Others will expect the faculty member to make these arrangements. There are differing philosophies on note-taking services; some DSS professionals favor paid note-takers while others believe volunteers taking the course take better notes. Some institutions will send note-takers to a class while others will rely on the faculty to recruit volunteers. This should be discussed with the disabled student. They may already have someone in the class whom they know or have worked with before that they would like to ask to take notes for them. If you are familiar with your students and know who takes good notes, you might ask them if they would be willing to share notes. As a last resort you might announce to the class that you have a student with a disability who needs a notetaker. When a volunteer is found, you can ask them to stay after class for a moment and then identify and introduce them to the student for whom they will be taking notes. DSS should provide photocopy services or NCR (noncarbon reproduction) pads for note-takers.

Some accommodations will require cooperation between faculty, student, and DSS staff. The use of an Assistive Listening Device (ALD) is one example. An ALD is a closed FM radio system that broadcasts directly from the instructor to the student. DSS will need to provide the equipment, while the student must wear the receiver and the faculty member must wear the transmitter and the microphone. If a class is discussion-oriented, the instructor should talk to DSS about providing a conference microphone for the ALD system. DSS should provide CART and interpreter services. The faculty should talk to these professionals about the way they can best work together. However, when talking to the student, the instructor should always address the student, never the interpreter.

Other accommodations will lie solely with the instructor. In today's technologically sophisticated world these include such things as enlarged handouts and copies of overheads used in class. E-mail attachments can provide electronically formatted materials that a student can then access through their own assistive technology. Accommodations can be as simple as allowing a student to tape record lectures. In any case, taping lectures is an accommodation guaranteed by law. If you have a problem with students retaining tapes of lectures, you can negotiate providing the tapes for the students on the condition that they return the tapes to you at the end of the term.

Some accommodations may not be listed but will enhance the classroom experience. These include facing the students rather than the chalkboard when talking. When using audiovisual equipment in a darkened room, it is good to remember that students who read lips will require that a speaker's face be lit, while students with visual impairments may require copies of materials in alternate formats. Remember that even when an accommodation is the responsibility of the faculty member, the DSS staff is available to advise you on how best to meet it.

Faculty who are committed to teaching, however, will want to move beyond this basic cookbook method. They will want to engage all three partners in designing accommodations that will enhance the learning experience for their specific course. The accommodation list provided by DSS should be considered as minimal. Alternative accommodations that better serve your specific classroom situation may be substituted on consultation with the student. Situations unique to a course can be identified and addressed. The DSS staff is available to assist in brainstorming how to address unique learning opportunities, and they have access to an extended professional community as well. DSS professionals are usually affiliated with the Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), which publishes numerous resource materials and manages the Disability Student Services in Higher Education List (DSSHE-L), a list-serve that provides an ongoing dialogue via email for DSS staff. DSSHE-L also provides an archive of all communications on the list. Topics that have been discussed in the past include how to accommodate biblical languages such as Greek and Hebrew for students with visual and learning disabilities.

While faculty should feel confident in being creative and innovative in providing accommodations, I would offer one word of caution: Remember that you are in the position of power. Students tend to be agreeable with those who hold power over them. They may agree to less-than-appropriate accommodations simply because you are the instructor. This does not mean that they will refrain from charging you with insufficient accommodation if they are not satisfied with the final results. The student must feel that an accommodation is appropriate. It would be advisable for you to discuss your innovations with the DSS staff. Again, DSS assist the faculty as well as the student.

The latest school of thought emerging in DSS is “Universal Instructional Design” (UID). UID advocates building diverse ways of addressing various learning styles and disabilities into the structure of the curriculum. It is hoped that as the best teaching methods for addressing diverse learners are incorporated into the classroom, accommodation will be part of the natural structure of the education process. As faculty become more comfortable with addressing diverse learners, they will become more confident in accommodating students with disabilities.

## Resources

Information on Disability Services may be found at:

- [www.easi.cc](http://www.easi.cc)
- [listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?S1=dsshe-l](mailto:listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?S1=dsshe-l)

- [www.ahead.org](http://www.ahead.org)
- [www.janejarrow.com](http://www.janejarrow.com)