Accessibility and Accommodations

Bethann Durlin and Dr. Sarah Parsloe

Three Tips for Your Fall 2022 Classes

1. Lay a foundation for open dialogue between yourself and students with accommodations about their needs and how those needs can be met within the structure of your course.

Despite being encouraged to discuss their needs with their professors, students are often hesitant to do so. They fear that they will be judged, that they will be seen as a "problem student," or that they will be graded differently from their peers. By inviting students with accommodations to discuss their needs and accommodations with you early in the semester and demonstrating a collaborative and supportive environment, students are more likely to feel comfortable coming to you to brainstorm about how their accommodations "fit" within the structure of your course. You can initiate this dialogue during your first class meeting(s) in a few ways:

- **Invite students to meet with you about their accommodations.** Students often respond favorably when faculty "make the first move."
- **During the conversation, assume that your student is telling you the truth**; **they are the experts on their own brains/bodies.** Students with disabilities or chronic illnesses often encounter doubt from professors and others in power. They are constantly being asked to prove that they are "disabled enough" to "deserve" accommodations—especially when their disability is relatively invisible. If you approach these conversations assuming that students are "always trying to get out of things," you end up hurting students who are genuinely trying to learn despite facing additional challenges.
- **Re-frame accommodations as tools for removing barriers to learning**. Both students and faculty can internalize the ableist idea that accommodations are unfair advantages and that using them is a kind of cheating. This discourages students from applying for and using their accommodations. Use your syllabus statement as a guide for the best language to use. https://www.rollins.edu/accessibility-services/faculty-resources/syllabus-statement.html.

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2. Normalize conversations surrounding barriers to learning for *all* students in your class.

- **Encourage *all* students to share potential barriers to learning, brainstorming ways that you/they/the class can minimize these barriers.** Try a prompt like "what are some classroom norms, practices, or policies that make it more difficult for you to learn?" or "what are some classroom norms, practices, or policies that make it easier for you to learn?" You can use these prompts to facilitate a class-wide discussion or as part of an anonymous discussion facilitated though a platform like Mentimeter, Poll Everywhere, or Google Jam Board.
- **When prepping students for a quiz or exam, remind students that you will be planning around their accommodations (e.g., "if you have extended time, I have already added this to our Canvas quiz) and/or remind students to register for accommodations.** This signals that you "see" and think about students with disabilities in your classroom and that their needs are important to you.

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3. Reflect on your existing class policies and consider how they might inadvertently make your classroom less accessible for students with disabilities. What adjustments might you make? Here are a few class policies to think about:

- **Participation:** Do you assess participation in your class? If so, what does "good" participation look like and how do you measure it? Now, consider that participation might not look the same for all students (e.g., for students with social anxiety or students on the autism spectrum). Reflecting on this, might you assess participation differently (or not at all)? Does your class structure provide students with multiple ways to participate—not just by speaking aloud in front of you/their peers, but perhaps by writing responses to prompts, using a chat feature, or interacting with polls, a shared document, or other technology?

- **Technology in the classroom:** While the use of laptops in the classroom can be a frustrating source of distraction, a hard technology ban can accidentally call out students who must use their laptop to get access to note-taking or recording software. How might your technology policy take this into account?

- **Selecting and Posting Materials:** Consider how you select materials to use in class and provide these to students. What can you do to make these materials more accessible? For instance, if you show videos from YouTube, do you consistently turn on the captions feature (helpful to students who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or have an auditory processing weakness)? Do you provide your students with access to materials—handouts, slides, readings, etc.—in a digital format that could be read by screen reader software (helpful to students who are blind, visually impaired, or have a visual processing disorder)? Do your materials use alt text to describe informative graphics or images? What materials can students access on your Canvas site both during and after a class (e.g., access to your slides or notes can reinforce an oral lecture for students with an auditory processing disorder, as well as act as a visual organizer for students with executive functioning weaknesses).

- **Movement in the classroom:** Some of your students' chronic illnesses or disabilities mean that they may need to use the bathroom frequently, to eat or drink regularly, or to remove themselves from an over-stimulating environment. Others might have conditions that make it difficult for them to sit for an extended period of time. Students on the autism spectrum may move their bodies or use tools like fidget jewelry or headphones to manage sensory stimuli. Do your classroom policies or practices restrict students' ability to move? Do you tend to ask students questions like "where are you going?" when they get up from their desks? How might you instead encourage students to move in ways that help them feel comfortable?

- **Assessment:** Do you rely primarily on tests and quizzes to assess student learning? While these might make sense for your course, timed in-class exams can be extra challenging for students with testing anxiety and learning disabilities. What might be some alternative ways for students to demonstrate their learning in your class? Consider balancing tests/quizzes with these other forms of assessment. Additionally, consider giving your students some agency in deciding how they would like to be assessed. For instance, you might allow them to choose between an exam and a paper or between a written paper and a creative oral or visual project.

- **Deadlines:** Deadline extensions are a useful accommodation for students whose conditions flare unexpectedly. However, students might feel uncomfortable asking for an extension or may not be able to predict when they will need one. Are there ways to build flexibility into your deadline policies for all students? For instance, if you do not intend to grade a set of assignments immediately, consider offering a "grace period" (e.g., 24 hours) for turning in assignments without penalty. Alternatively, you might give all students one or more "whoops" passes that allow them to turn in an assignment [number of] days late without penalty. Policies like this encourage students to turn in work in a timely manner while also acknowledging that they may face unexpectedly challenging circumstances.

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