MAKING ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS
WITH DISABILITIES:
A GUIDE FOR FACULTY AND GRADUATE
STUDENT INSTRUCTORS

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Introduction

In focus groups at the University of Michigan, students with disabilities have identified two significant impediments to their learning and academic persistence: 1) instructors’ lack of knowledge about disabilities and accommodations, and 2) instructors’ difficulty in talking with students about these issues. These findings echo other studies that have been conducted over the past decade at other major universities, where students consistently state that faculty are not familiar with disability rights, services, or appropriate accommodations (Baggett, 1994; Elacqua, 1996; Marchant, 1990; West, Kregel, Getzel, Zhu, Ipsen, & Martin, 1993). Ironically, it appears that the first thing that students with disabilities need to learn in university classrooms is how to educate their teachers. This paper urges a reversal of responsibility, so that instructors can take the lead in making their teaching accessible for students with disabilities.

This paper discusses the increasing need for university instructors to prepare for students with disabilities in their classrooms, identifies resources available to faculty, documents students’ perceptions, and recommends four kinds of changes in teaching practice. Much of this work is needed to eliminate obstacles that instructors inadvertently create, or reinforce, by existing approaches to teaching and to students.

The need

Federal legislation has been opening doors, literally and figuratively, for people with disabilities since the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968. The American Disabilities Act of 1990 provided even more opportunities. Until recently, the most sweeping effects of these changes, in American education, have been in public schools on the elementary and secondary level. Now, the successes of the past decade are impacting universities.

Close to 10% of the undergraduate students attending colleges and universities in the United States in 2000 reported having disabilities (Paul, 2000). In 1978, by contrast, only 2.8% of the U.S. undergraduates reported having disabilities. At the University of Michigan, students with disabilities comprise a smaller proportion than the national average, but the trends are the same. In 2000, over 4.1% of the first year class reported having disabilities (Matney, 2001).

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Nationally, only 2.8% of undergraduates reported having disabilities in 1978. In 2000, nearly 10% of U.S. undergraduate students reported having disabilities. At the University of Michigan, the proportion is smaller but still growing: in 2000, over 4% of the first-year class reported having disabilities.

These figures mean that university instructors who have never before taught students with disabilities will be doing so in the near future. A lecturer in a large introductory class is likely to have students with disabilities in class because, on average, four of every 100 first-year students at the University of Michigan have disabilities. Even in a seminar or recitation section of 25 students, the instructor is likely to have at least one student with a disability.

The changes reflect three major trends. First, students with disabilities are continuing their education with the expectation that they can be successful. Second, they are doing so because they have been successful in high school. There are students being prepared for college today who once would not have had the chance for a post-secondary education. Third, there is more diagnosis and self-reporting by students with disabilities, particularly those with learning disabilities (SLD).

Learning-disabled students have difficulty processing written or spoken information, and the disability interferes with their ability to read, write, spell, listen, talk, or do math. Like other disabilities, these are quite specific in their impact: having a learning disability does not mean that the capacity to learn is limited. Unlike most other disabilities, learning disabilities are not visible. As a result, these students face different issues in negotiating social perceptions than students whose disabilities are apparent (Stage & Milne, 1996).

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A social dimension of this demographic shift, one that impacts student-faculty interactions directly, is that many college-bound students have been educated in self-advocacy. They understand that having access to the materials for learning is a right, and they act accordingly. On the other hand, just as the impairments, the inventiveness, and the talents of these students defy uniform description, what they say about their rights is also richly varied. Not all are outspoken or heroic; many do not speak even to friends about differences between them. Instructors need to be responsive, then, to styles of self-advocacy that range from outspoken to self-protective.

Thus, the “community” and the “culture” of students with disabilities in a university are created in part by the fact that their increasing collective presence has revealed barriers within universities that were less apparent before they came. The very diversity of students with disabilities — and their claims to legitimacy — call for instructors to reassess established conventions about educational spaces, time constraints, the way we think about the connection between specific physical abilities and other abilities, and the tools used for learning and knowing. The increasing number of students with disabilities on campus has thus enriched the student body and the intellectual life of colleges and universities.

Communications between students and faculty

Research undertaken before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted in 1990 showed that faculty responsiveness to students with disabilities correlated directly with their knowledge of disabilities and their experience in teaching students with disabilities (Marchant, 1990). As mentioned above, over a decade later, students still continue to report faculty awareness as a key factor in their success.

At the University of Michigan, students who were interviewed described faculty as being unprepared to respond to students’ needs. Faculty were unaware of their responsibilities as well as students’ rights. One student put it this way, “Faculty don’t understand; but when they become aware, they are helpful.” Awareness in this context means knowing that students with disabilities are entitled to accommodations, that there are standards already established for them, and that student requests for accommodations reflect needs rather than preferences (Rickman, 1995).
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Students come to a university from high school environments where information about them and their needs is often public knowledge. Their teachers know the students, the options, and what has worked for other teachers with particular students. As one student explained, “In high school there are always workshops that our teachers are going to all the time. I don’t think any graduate professors or anybody in the universities go to these things.” Although this student’s comment may be overstated, the implication for student-faculty interactions is clear: students come to higher education unprepared for their professors’ lack of knowledge about disabilities. Their expectations of faculty awareness and understanding may be too high, especially as they begin their collegiate experience.

Another factor that can undermine faculty-student exchanges comes from the differences between student and faculty discourses. Some faculty who are unfamiliar with students’ rights and the rhetoric of students’ rights can have a hard time responding favorably to a self-confident self-advocate. Other faculty create barriers to communication, however unintentionally, when they expect students to take all the initiative. Asking faculty for accommodations is difficult; nearly every student expresses nervousness about it. Faculty who are not prepared or open to requests can have an especially hard time responding to students who are just learning self-advocacy, or who don’t feel comfortable advocating for themselves.

One result of awkward exchanges is that students worry about what their instructors really think about them. Discomfort or nervousness on the part of a faculty member can easily be misinterpreted by a student. This discomfort is one reason that some students wait until late in the term to raise issues of accommodations: they want to establish some kind of communication with an instructor, to demonstrate their abilities, or to dispel doubts first. Such waiting is often counterproductive, and is often misinterpreted as poor planning on the student’s part.

In general, students don’t want to inconvenience faculty or risk “bothering” them. As one student said, “It seems like maybe they’re a little put out by it, so that makes me feel like I can’t really come and talk to them about everything because I feel like I’m bothering them all the time.” Faculty unfamiliarity with students’ needs thus contributes to a tension between faculty and students with disabilities, a tension that can reproduce itself in future interactions.

What faculty need to know and where they can go for help

The University of Michigan’s Office of Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) is dedicated to identifying and documenting students’ disabilities. In addition, the SSD website (http://www.umich.edu/~sswd/ssd/) includes a Faculty Handbook that lists typical accommodations for students with disabilities. Faculty and GSIs can obtain information about common student requests as well as techniques and technologies for accommodations that are available throughout the University. The professional staff in SSD will also respond to questions and clarify procedures. Accommodations for students may include, but are not limited to: hiring readers or interpreters, using tape-recorded books, taping classes, and having more time for timed exams. Faculty can verify students’ disabilities, learn the accommodations they certify need, and arrange an instructor-student contract for customizing standard accommodations, if this is necessary and useful. The Handbook emphasizes that, while there are general guidelines that faculty need to know about, each student is the “expert” on his or her own particular set of needs, and instructors need to work with individual students to arrange accommodations.

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The University of Michigan’s Faculty Handbook also offers “Recommendations for All Courses,” listing features
of course design that promote efforts to accommodate needs of students with disabilities and enhance undergraduate education for all students. These strategies and others are listed on pp. 8-9, below.

Establishing equity

Students with disabilities learn better not only when their instructors know how to arrange accommodations, but also when their instructors treat them as equal participants in class. One university study showed that most students with disabilities have an internal conflict between the desire to be independent and the desire to use services and accommodations (Synatschek, 1994). Another study demonstrated that acceptance of disabilities correlates positively with higher academic achievement and academic persistence (Flowers, 1993).

While such a correlation is not surprising, it does have implications for faculty. Instructors can help students accept disabilities by normalizing accommodations. Instructor advocacy for the appropriateness of accommodations is important not only for students with disabilities but also for their peers and for the larger university culture. Faculty have to take the lead by affirming that, in the structure of their own courses, accommodations establish equity — rather than preference.

Accommodations that are material — large print books, specially adapted computers, interpreters in class — are generally accepted as being equitable. Advocates want attitudes toward these accommodations to be the model for thinking about all accommodations. But accommodations involving time seem different somehow. Having more time is, frankly, an accommodation that every student would like to have (and every instructor, too). Also, when accommodations involve getting more time, students with disabilities are conspicuous. When students leave or are in a different room for an exam, they know it is “obvious” to others that some accommodation is being made. Students with disabilities often express compassion for their classmates who have to negotiate pressures without accommodations: “Everyone experiences difficulty now and then trying to study. I think it’s hard.”

On the other hand, students who do need more time may take longer than their peers to complete their degrees. Thus, the feeling of having “less” to do or more time to do it in (which can be undermining in itself) is complicated by the knowledge that it may take longer to graduate: “It’s frustrating when everyone else is taking 16 credits and ... I’ve tried it and I had to drop a class.”

Some faculty want to bring too much attention to a student’s disability, expect a student to be a rights advocate, or want a student with disabilities to clarify his or her need for accommodations to classmates. One University of Michigan student described an instructor who asked her to tell a class about her disability and explain why she needed accommodations, with the idea that the accommodations had to be “above board” to be “fair.” This is invasive and unnecessary. Respect for privacy is critical, just as respect for students rights advocates is appropriate.

Promoting social acceptance

At the University of Michigan, one concern that all students with disabilities have raised centers on negative peer responses to student disabilities in the classroom (McCune, 2001). These responses include resentment, denial, silencing, and discomfort. Students with learning disabilities report their peers saying things like, “Oh, no, you don’t have a disability,” showing an unwillingness to acknowledge the disability. On the other hand, students with extreme physical impairments report comments such as “Is s/he for real?,” implying that they cannot be serious students because of their disabilities. Some peers resist the idea that someone with a visible disability could be an able student or that someone who is smart has a learning disability.

In a study of university teaching by Denny and Carson (1994), students with disabilities were asked to name classroom strategies that would promote social integration. Students identified three levels for faculty to work on: first, faculty interaction with students should model acceptance on the intellectual, academic, and social levels; second, faculty should structure classroom time to increase social contact; and third, faculty should structure assignments that allow students to work in teams for extended periods. These three strategies break down negative preconceptions that students may bring to their university classrooms, enhancing student interactions and the teaching environment simultaneously.

Modeling social acceptance in class includes the strategies already discussed — being prepared for students’ requests and establishing equity in class — but goes beyond these to help erode subtle or unconscious forms of derision, rejection, or exclusion.

Many people express good intentions toward students
with disabilities in ways that unintentionally demean them. Students with disabilities almost universally, regardless of the kind of disability they have, experience people talking to them in tones used for children or for people with limited capacity to understand. Talking loudly or slowly and using intonations of affection are all unfortunate but common responses. Faculty who can talk forthrightly with their students model social acceptance; they help to discourage cultural practices that express sympathy instead of information. Nonverbal cues are as important in expressing equal treatment as what is said.

The way to have the greatest effect on students’ social integration, however, is by ensuring that the students in a class have opportunities for sustained interactions. Such social “contact” in class means more than allowing time for discussion. To ensure that all students take part, discussion needs to be structured. Small group work and paired discussion have many formats and are efficient ways to do this. In structures like these, students with disabilities have the chance to relate and share what they know without competing for social space because the other students in the class have the same chance to talk. Helpful guidelines for these practices are provided on CRIT’s teaching strategies website (http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tsemain.html). Instructors can also diversify their course content by integrating natural references to people with disabilities when possible (Dibernard, 1996; Rauscher & McClintock, 1997).

Providing support for students who were not diagnosed before college

Not all students with disabilities at the University have a lifetime of practice behind them. Some become physically disabled during their college years because of progressive medical conditions or accidents. Some discover that medical or physical conditions underlie impairments they had been able to accommodate on their own until college. Faculty cannot assume that the student “knows the ropes.” These students will be learning how to arrange accommodations, and faculty oftentimes have to discover with these students what accommodations work effectively.

A second set of students pose a particularly difficult challenge for instructors. These are students who have disabilities but do not know it before facing the more intense workloads that college demands. Unfortunately, these students have difficulties that can be quite serious and may look very similar to those of very poor or careless students. When writing lengthy, timed exams, these students may produce unintelligible answers. One University of Michigan student recounted: “I recently had a GSI. She couldn’t read my writing and actually I couldn’t read it either; we sat down and went through every single word. I actually got a good grade on it because we sat down and did that. She just didn’t understand what I was writing.” Another student said, “Faculty would write these comments like, ‘Don’t you have a spell checker?’ or all these different things, and there would be really nasty comments on your papers and you would get these really low grades.” These students were subsequently diagnosed with learning disabilities.

Students in focus groups at the University of Michigan emphasized that the responses of some instructors have been helpful and enabled them to find out why they were having trouble. When an instructor asks how much time and effort a student put into a paper, for example, the answer may help both the student and the instructor to identify underlying causes. As one student put it, faculty can “ask a student what they put into a paper, instead of assuming that you just whipped out a paper in 10 minutes.”

It is important that faculty refrain from making diagnoses or undermining students’ confidence. The same courses of action apply to all students who are struggling: refer them to units that can provide specialized assistance. Students at any level who want to improve their writing abilities can be referred to the Sweetland Writing Center. Students can get help with math in the Math Department program and with science in the Science Learning Center. Students can also be encouraged by instructors to make revisions and to keep portfolios of their tests and assignments to look back on their previous work. Advisors at the office of Services for Students with Disabilities can assist instructors with how to refer students to SSD, particularly when instructors are not sure that a student has a disability. SSD advisors will also answer questions instructors may have about how to respond to students’ needs.

Structuring teaching to anticipate student needs

Changes in university teaching practices that anticipate the needs of students with disabilities benefit all students. Research indicates that the faculty who have most success in promoting undergraduate student learning pay attention to the success of all of their students and design instruction to maximize students’ engagement in the classroom. The Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate
Education overlap with the recommendations for teaching students with disabilities: promote faculty-student contact and ongoing communication, create occasions for cooperation among students, plan active learning opportunities during class time, provide students with ongoing feedback, emphasize time on task, attend to diversity in the classroom, and maintain high expectations. These principles clearly emphasize inclusivity. Including students with disabilities is integral to good teaching (Chickering & Gamson, 1999).

Some instructors think that being explicit, prioritizing, and emphasizing connections and expectations — strategies that assist students with learning disabilities in particular — may lessen the analytical or interpretive challenges in a university course. But communicating clearly can bring into focus the areas of interpretive nuance or problem-solving that faculty want students to address, and can sharpen what and how students learn. The confidence students gain from instructors’ clarity allows them all to go further and question more than in classes in which instructors are less explicit in their expectations of students (Hodge & Preston-Sabin, 1997).

For additional suggestions to support student success, see CRLT Occasional Paper, No. 16, Research on Student Notetaking: Implications for Faculty and Graduate Student Instructors (DeZure, Kaplan, & Deerman, 2001).

Conclusion

Students with disabilities and the professionals who support them are the best sources of information for university instructors who want to make their teaching effective for all their students. Four basic kinds of strategies work best. First, faculty can be better prepared to respond positively when asked by students for accommodations. Second, faculty can plan their teaching so that making accommodations does not create a set of double standards for students. Third, instructors can establish an equitable environment in which all students experience their access to learning as being “fair.” Fourth, instructors can promote social integration in their classrooms. These strategies support one another. Faculty can include most of the recommendations in this paper by making minor changes in the planning and teaching of courses. Introducing changes gradually works best for most instructors.

Not all obstacles to learning can be eliminated for students with disabilities; their pathway to learning is not smooth. However, more University resources are available than ever before, standards for appropriate accommodations have been established, and the process by which students have their disabilities documented is routinized, so that faculty do not have to guess what students need. The obstacles that faculty can remove, however, are those most invisible to them — the obstacles that derive from habits of practice that may seem benign — as elemental as a flight of steps once appeared to be.

Student interviews at the University of Michigan were conducted by Volker Krause of the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) (1998), and by Pat McCune of the Rackham Graduate School (2000). The students interviewed were graduate and undergraduate students, and the portions of their comments relating to their undergraduate experiences at the University of Michigan are cited in this text.
References


McCune, P. (2001). What do disabilities have to do with diversity? About Campus, 6(2), 5-12.


TEACHING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: WHAT FACULTY CAN DO:

For Better Interactions and Establishing Equity

1. Include in the course syllabus a statement asking students with disabilities to meet to arrange accommodations. Request or require that this be done by a specific date early in the semester to avoid students waiting anxiously and coming in just before a midterm or final exam.

Sample statements:

*If you need or desire an accommodation for a disability, I encourage you to contact me at your earliest convenience. Many aspects of this course — the assignments, the in-class activities, and the communication tools I use — can be modified to facilitate your participation and progress throughout the semester. The earlier you make me aware of your needs, the more effectively we will be able to use the resources available to us, such as the office of Services for Students with Disabilities and the Adaptive Technology Computing Site. If you do decide to disclose your disability, I will treat that information as private and confidential.*

- adapted from J. Bernard, personal communication, June 5, 2002.

*In compliance with University of Michigan policy and equal access laws, I am available to discuss appropriate academic accommodations that may be required for students with disabilities. Requests for academic accommodations are to be made during the first three weeks of the semester, except for unusual circumstances, so arrangements can be made. Students are encouraged to contact the office of Services for Students with Disabilities, if they have not done so previously, for disability verification and to determine reasonable accommodations.*

- adapted from Student Disability Services, Cornell University, 2002.

Any student who feels that he/she may need an accommodation for any sort of disability, please make an appointment to see me during my office hours.

- Services for Students with Disabilities, University of Michigan, 2002

2. At the first class, clarify how students can indicate their need for an accommodation. Use a standard statement that reflects what is on the syllabus. This approach preserves students’ privacy. It also helps affirm your policy.

3. Include in the course syllabus very clear statements about assignments, expectations, and criteria for evaluation. This helps students plan their work and it helps them anticipate the accommodations they may need to arrange.

4. During an initial meeting with a student who comes to discuss accommodations, ask the student for a copy of his/her accommodation needs from the office of Services for Students with Disabilities. Discuss the course work with the student and establish reasonable, mutual expectations.

5. Keep all disability information completely confidential. At no time should the class be informed that a student has a disability, except at the student’s express request.

For Each Class Meeting

1. In preparing lectures and class sessions, organize the material into segments and include prompts that will mark the transition from one segment to the next. Even if faculty have an informal approach to teaching, these formal devices will help students.

2. Start each class with a topical outline of material to be covered that day. Handouts can provide support for topics that were covered quickly or incompletely. Students who cannot jot down notes quickly can listen and reflect on the handouts later.

3. At the conclusion of class, briefly summarize key points. This is especially important after a class discussion.

4. During class, speak directly to students, and use gestures and expression to convey further meaning.

5. Make sure that all the students can hear you; speak directly to students; and always repeat student comments and questions to ensure that they, too, can be heard.

6. Present new or technical vocabulary on the blackboard/overhead or use a handout. Define and explain terms and use new terms in context to convey greater meaning.

7. Make lecture notes available.

8. Provide adequate opportunities for questions and answers, including review sessions.

9. Give assignments in both oral and written form to

*The “What Can Faculty Do” sections in this paper are modified from the University of Michigan office of Services for Students with Disabilities’ “Recommendations for All Courses” webpage (http://www.umich.edu/~sswd/ssd/fac-recommend.html).*
avoid confusion.
10. Allow students to tape record lectures. (If faculty want to reserve rights to the material, they can restrict taping privileges to students with accommodations and ask for those students to sign a form protecting the lecturer’s rights.)

For Student Assignments

1. Select reading material far enough in advance so that books and articles can be available to the visually impaired (or others who will need them taped). It takes an average of six weeks to get a book tape-recorded.
2. If you use visual materials (slides, film clips, etc.), make them accessible outside of class for students to study (e.g., on reserve at the library or on UM.CourseTools).
3. Announce reading assignments well in advance for those students using taped materials or alternative formats. If you change the direction of the course by adding new materials, use short articles or excerpts to help students with disabilities keep up.
4. Plan study questions to help direct students’ inquiry and to help them prioritize.

For Examinations

1. Provide study questions for exams using the same structure and level of inquiry that will be used on the examinations. Explain or provide an example of what constitutes a good answer and why.
2. Permit use of simple calculators, scratch paper, and spellers’ dictionaries during exams.
3. Allow students with disabilities who require alternate testing formats to demonstrate mastery of course material using methods appropriate to the student and the subject matter (e.g., extended time limits for tests, taped exams, individually proctored exams in a separate room).

For Course Design

(Note: Advance planning and advance structuring are the keys to engaging all students. Students who need taped books and materials cannot choose courses that faculty design the week before classes start; books cannot be taped in that time. Nor can students with disabilities take courses in which the reading assignments are developed from week to week in response to the direction the class moves. Faculty who value flexibility may need to balance those needs with the needs of students with disabilities.)

1. Organize the course into sections so that students can manage their studying time.
2. Select reading material with students’ studying in mind. Plan study questions to accompany reading material when you are planning the course. In a course using a textbook, choose one with an accompanying study guide for optional student use, if you can find one with priorities you share.