Teaching Students with Disabilities

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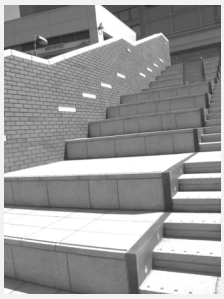
Terminology

In order to create an inclusive classroom where all students are respected, it is important to use language that prioritizes the student over his or her disability. Disability labels can be stigmatizing and perpetuate false stereotypes where students who are disabled are not as capable as their peers. In general, it is appropriate to reference the disability only when it is pertinent to the situation. For instance, it is better to say "The student, who has a disability" rather than "The disabled student" because it places the importance on the student, rather than on the fact that the student has a disability.

For more information on terminology, see the guide provided by the National Center on Disability and Journalism: ncdj.org/style-guide.



Students of all abilities and backgrounds want classrooms that are inclusive and convey respect. For those students with disabilities, the classroom setting may present certain challenges that need accommodation and consideration.

Types of Disabilities

Disabilities can be temporary (such as a broken arm), relapsing and remitting, or long-term. Types of disabilities may include:

- Hearing loss
- Low vision or blindness
- Learning disabilities, such as Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, dyslexia, or dyscalculia
- Mobility disabilities
- Chronic health disorders, such as epilepsy, Crohn's disease, arthritis, cancer, diabetes, migraine headaches, or multiple sclerosis
- Psychological or psychiatric disabilities, such as mood, anxiety and depressive disorders, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Asperger's disorder and other Autism spectrum disorders
- Traumatic Brain Injury

Students may have disabilities that are more or less apparent. For instance, you may not know that a student has epilepsy or a chronic pain disorder unless she chooses to disclose or an incident arises. These "hidden" disorders can be hard for students to disclose because many people assume they are healthy because "they look fine." In some cases, the student may make a seemingly strange request or action that is disability-related. For example, if you ask the students to rearrange the desks, a student may not help because he has a torn ligament or a relapsing and remitting condition like Multiple Sclerosis. Or, a student may ask to record lectures because she has dyslexia and it takes longer to transcribe the lectures.

References

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Confidentiality, Stigma, and Disclosure

A student's disclosure of a disability is always voluntary. However, students with disabilities may feel nervous to disclose sensitive medical information to an instructor. Often, students must combat negative stereotypes about their disabilities held by others and even themselves. For instance, a recent study by May & Stone (2010) on disability stereotypes found that undergraduates with and without learning disabilities rated individuals with learning disabilities as being less able to learn or of lower ability than students without those disabilities. In fact, students with learning disabilities are no less able than any other student; they simply receive, process, store, and/or respond to information differently (National Center for Learning Disabilities).

Similarly students with physical disabilities face damaging and incorrect stereotypes, such as that those who use a wheelchair must also have a mental disability. (Scorgie, K., Kildal, L., & Wilgosh, L., 2010) Additionally, those students with "hidden disabilities" like epilepsy or chronic pain frequently describe awkward situations in which others minimize their disability with phrases like "Well, you look fine." (Scorgie, K., Kildal, L., & Wilgosh, L., 2010)

In Barbara Davis's *Tools for Teaching*, she explains that it is important for instructors to "become aware of any biases and stereotypes [they] may have absorbed….Your attitudes and values not only influence the attitudes and values of your students, but they can affect the way you teach, particularly your assumptions about students…which can lead to unequal learning outcomes for those in your classes." (Davis, 2010, p. 58) As a way to combat these issues, she advises that instructors treat each student as an individual and recognize the complexity of diversity.

Strategies

A statement in your syllabus inviting students with disabilities to meet with you privately is a good step in starting a conversation with those students who need accommodations and feel comfortable approaching you about their needs. Let the student know times s/he can meet you to discuss the accommodations and how soon the student should do so.

Two sample syllabus statements:

- The Department of Spanish and Portuguese is committed to making educational opportunities available to all students. In order for its faculty members to properly address the needs of students who have disabilities, it is necessary that those students approach their instructors as soon as the semester starts, preferably on the first day of class. They should bring an official letter from the Opportunity Development Center (2-4705) explaining their specific needs so that their instructors are aware of them early on and can make the appropriate arrangements.

- If you have a learning or physical disability, or if you learn best utilizing a particular method, please discuss with me how I can best accommodate your learning needs. I am committed to creating an effective learning environment for all learning styles. However, I can only do this successfully if you discuss your needs with me in advance of the quizzes, papers, and notebooks. I will maintain the confidentiality of your learning needs. If appropriate, you should contact the Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Disability Services Department to get more information on accommodating disabilities.

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Access to Resources

When students enter the university setting, they are responsible for requesting accommodations through the appropriate office. This may be the first time the student will have had to advocate for himself. For first year students, this may be a different process than what they experienced in high school with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 plan. The U.S. Department of Education has a pamphlet discussing rights and responsibilities for students entering postsecondary education: purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS74685

Every university has its own process for filing paperwork and the type of paperwork needed. At Vanderbilt, students must request accommodations through the Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Disability Services Department (EAD). [www.vanderbilt.edu/ead]. As part of the required paperwork, the student must present documentation from an appropriate medical professional indicating the diagnosis of the current disability and, among other things, the types of accommodations requested. All medical information provided is kept confidential. Only the approved accommodation arrangements are discussed with faculty and administrators on an as-needed basis.

It is important to note that this process takes time and certain accommodations, like an interpreter, must be made within a certain time period.

Provide an easily understood and detailed course syllabus. Make the syllabus, texts, and other materials available before registration.

If materials are on-line, **consider colors, fonts, and formats that are easily viewed** by students with low vision or a form of color blindness.

Clearly spell out expectations before the course begins (e.g., grading, material to be covered, due dates).

Make sure that **all students can access your office** or arrange to meet in a location that is more accessible.

On the first day of class, you can **distribute a brief Getting to Know You questionnaire** that ends with the question 'Is there anything you'd like me to know about you?' This invites students to privately self-disclose important challenges that may not meet the EAD accommodations requirements or that may be uncomfortable for the student to talk to you about in person upon first meeting.

Don't assume what students can or cannot do with regards to participating in classroom activities. Think of multiple ways students may be able to participate without feeling excluded. The next section on "Teaching for Inclusion" has some ideas for alternative participation.

Teaching for Inclusion: Inclusive Design

One of the common concerns instructors have about accommodations is whether they will change the nature of the course they are teaching. However, accommodations are designed to give all students equal access to learning in the classroom. When planning your course, consider the following questions (from Scott, 1998):

- What is the purpose of the course?
- What methods of instruction are absolutely necessary? Why?
- What outcomes are absolutely required of all students? Why?
- What methods of assessing student outcomes are absolutely necessary? Why?
- What are acceptable levels of performance on these student outcome measures?

Answering these questions can help you define essential requirements for you and your students. For instance, participation in lab settings is critical for many biology classes; however, is traditional class lecture the only means of delivering instruction in a humanities or social science course? Additionally, is an in-class written essay exam the only means of evaluating a student who has limited use of her hands? Could an in-person or taped oral exam accomplish the same goal? (Scott, 1998; Bourke, Strehorn, & Silver, 2000)

When teaching a student with any disability, it is important to remember that many of the principles for inclusive design could be considered beneficial to any student. The idea of "Universal Design" is a method of designing course materials, content, and instruction to benefit all learners. Instead of adapting or retrofitting a course to a specific audience, Universal Design emphasizes environments that are accessible to everyone regardless of ability.

Many of Universal Design's methods emphasize a deliberate type of teaching that clearly lays out the course's goals for the semester and for the particular class period. For instance, a syllabus with clear course objectives, assignment details, and deadlines helps students plan their schedules accordingly. Additionally, providing an outline of the day's topic at the beginning of a class period and summarizing key points at the end can help students understand the logic of your organization and give them more time to record the information.

Similarly, some instructional material may be difficult for students with certain disabilities. For instance, when showing a video in class you need to consider your audience. Students with visual disabilities may have difficulty seeing non-verbalized actions; while those with disorders like photosensitive epilepsy may experience seizures with flashing lights or images; and those students with hearing loss may not be able to hear the accompanying audio. Using closed-captioning, providing electronic transcripts, describing on-screen action, allowing students to check the video out on their own, and outlining the role the video plays in the day's lesson helps reduce the access barrier for students with disabilities and allows them the ability to be an active member of the class. Additionally, it allows other students the opportunity to engage with the material in multiple ways as needed. (Burgstahler & Cory, 2010; Scott, McGuire & Shaw, 2003; Silver, Bourke & Strehorn, 1998)

Learn More

For more information on Universal Design or making your class more inclusive at Vanderbilt, the Center for Teaching offers workshops and one-on-one consultations. Additionally, the **EAD** office can help students and instructors address any questions or concerns they may have.
615-322-4705 www.vanderbilt.edu/ead

The Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) has a list of resources for implementing universal design principles in the classroom.
www.ahead.org/resources/ud

Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), home to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), has an extensive guide on considerations and suggested classroom practices for teaching students with disabilities.
www.rit.edu/studentaffairs/disabilityservices/info.php

The United Spinal Association has a publication on Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities.
www.unitedspinal.org/disability-etiquette