

Teaching Students with Disabilities¹

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In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became law and ushered in a new era for the rights of persons with disabilities. Although the ADA was not the first legislation to protect the rights of persons with disabilities, its scope and far-reaching effects caused quite a stir among leaders of business, industry, and education. Public attention focused on the language of the ADA, which mandated that organizations make "reasonable accommodations" for individuals with disabilities.

A disability is a "physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such an individual, a record of such an impairment, or being regarded as having such an impairment" (ADA, 1992, § 12102, § 3, (2)). What is a reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities?

Changes in a work or school site, program, or job that make it possible for an otherwise qualified employee or student to perform the duties or tasks required constitute a reasonable accommodation. Exceptions can be made if the accommodation causes undue hardship on the organization being asked for the accommodation. Undue hardship may take into account the cost of making the accommodation in relation to the size and financial status of the organization.

The implications of ADA for educational institutions and instructors are still unclear over a decade after the passage of the act. The wording of ADA is ambiguous and each year the courts make rulings that clarify the limits of the act. However, although we may not know the limits of the act, most institutions have made considerable progress in upholding the spirit, if not the letter, of the law. In this essay, I will address several issues that faculty may encounter when teaching students with disabilities. However, I'm going to give only one piece of general advice: Be prepared!

Part of this process of preparation involves knowing the services your institution provides for students with disabilities. Unlike 15 years ago, most institutions today maintain an Office of Disability Services (ODS). ODS officials work with students to certify disabilities and act as liaisons among students, faculty, and administration. Most ODSs also provide a variety of services for students and faculty that make the offering of accommodations fairly easy. Some ODS offices offer testing services, note-taking services, and a variety of disability-specific help. Working closely with ODS and the students will generally lead to a more satisfying experience for all concerned.

Be prepared for a lesson in diversity. Most of us give special attention to diversity issues in our classes, but our focus is more frequently oriented toward issues related to ethnic diversity. However, students with disabilities also comprise a diverse group that may provide a challenge to our teaching

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methods. Although I don't wish to oversimplify, I find it useful to classify student disabilities into two groups.

The first group might be called The Silent Disabilities: Many of the disabilities with which we regularly deal in our classes are those that are not noticeable by casual observation. Learning disabilities may not be evident, but those who have been diagnosed with them may have significant problems with processing auditory and/or visual information. Obviously, students with auditory processing difficulty may need assistance with information presented orally. Taping lectures allows students to replay parts that they may not have adequately processed the first time. Providing students with outlines ahead of time or even arranging for a note taker may be helpful. Alternatively, providing copies of overheads or PowerPoint slides may reduce the load on students. Verbalizing material on overhead transparencies in class may be helpful to students with visual processing difficulties. Students with learning disabilities may need more time on exams or even require another person to read a particularly long multiple-choice exam. Most of these accommodations can be easily handled with a minimum of preparation on the instructor's part.

The second, somewhat smaller group may require considerably more preparation on the instructor's part. These students have significant sensory disabilities such as loss of sight and hearing, or significant mobility deficits due to conditions such as cerebral palsy. Although diverse in its own right, this group may require instructors to consider more elaborate accommodations compared to the first group.

When preparing to provide accommodations for this latter group, be careful to avoid stereotypes. Nearly 20 years ago, before the days of ODSs, a student who was blind informed me that she was enrolling in my class in the fall semester. I initially thought that I should plan for this student by getting handouts, notes, exams, and other course materials transcribed into Braille. I was the master of good intentions. After I spent quite a bit of time and effort getting Braille transcriptions, I discovered that this student was, in fact, a Braille reader. If she had not been a Braille reader, my advance preparation would have been wasted due to my stereotype that blind people generally read Braille. In fact, after this experience, I learned that many blind individuals do not read Braille. The percentage of Braille readers has declined over the last 20 years or so. Computer-assisted functions such as audio screen readers now take the place of Braille for many who are blind. It is all too easy to fall into the trap of believing that there is a particular profile of students with specific disabilities.

I do two specific things to prepare for teaching students with significant sensory disabilities. First, I ask ODS personnel if they can recommend specific teaching methods of which I might not be aware. Second, and more importantly, when dealing with students whose disabilities require more than simple accommodations such as taping lectures and providing outlines, I discuss with them their preferences and past experiences in similar courses.

These conferences have been very helpful. Students with disabilities are usually much more knowledgeable than instructors regarding specific techniques that allow them to be successful in their courses. I determine their specific preferences in classroom situations, such as special seating arrangements. For blind students, I might determine if their condition is congenital or was acquired after a period of visual experience, which can be helpful to me in formulating my verbal descriptions during lectures. I might also inquire about their preferred ways of handling classroom discussion. Some blind students appreciate the instructor calling other students in class by their names prior to making comments during discussion. This tactic is particularly helpful early in the semester, when blind students attempt to connect specific voices to specific students. Other blind students may prefer to avoid this tactic because they believe that it draws too much attention to their disability. In sum,

students usually make an excellent guide for instructors who attempt to structure their classrooms to provide accommodations.

In your interactions with some students with disabilities, be prepared to encounter things that may, at first, be distracting. For example, if you have a student with a severe hearing impairment, you may find yourself communicating to that student through a signer. You may find that this arrangement is a bit unnerving at first, but it does not typically take too much time for you and your other students to adjust. Likewise, when communicating directly to the student it is tempting to "talk at" the signer. Instead, talk directly to the student, who may actually be using a combination of signing and lip-reading to "hear" you.

As prepared as you may be, unexpected things may happen. For example, it took some time to get used to having a guide dog in classes. One of my students had two guide dogs over the course of a year. At first, I found it a little disconcerting when the guide dog sat in the front row and stared at me, although the staring was preferable to when she fell asleep and snored loudly. (The dog may have been in good company, though, in an 8:00 am statistics course.) The second guide dog that attended class was flatulent, which made for a rather interesting atmosphere. Although guide dogs in the classroom may provide some interesting experiences, they may also provide instructors an opportunity to educate other students about the etiquette of dealing with them. For example, students should be informed that they should not feed or touch a guide dog when it is in harness. Instructors should emphasize that the dog is working and should not be treated as a pet. The Guide Dog Foundation (<http://www.guidedog.org>) provides an excellent set of rules for dealing with guide dogs.

Although the goal of providing accommodations to students with disabilities is to allow otherwise qualified students to succeed in learning, I believe instructors reap benefits, too. Teaching students with disabilities tends to give instructors a new perspective on their teaching. Preparing accommodations forces instructors to rethink teaching methods and strategies. Over time it is easy to develop habits in the classroom that may not be conducive to learning for students with disabilities. Talking while writing on the board or facing away from the class might be particularly problematic for hearing impaired students who use lip-reading as part of their verbal acquisition strategy. Verbal descriptions of materials on the board or on overheads may facilitate the classroom experience of a blind student, but it also may cause instructors to give considerable thought to what specific information they include on these media. In fact, instructors may find that other students appreciate the changes the instructor makes for students with disabilities.

One final thought regarding terminology. You may notice that throughout this column I varied the manner by which I referred to students with disabilities. In some places, I used the phrase "a student who is blind." In other places, I referred to a "blind student." I prefer using the former rather than the latter for one simple reason: Referring to the student first focuses on the person, not the disability. However, in writing it can be cumbersome to use that format consistently, so for variety, I varied the way by which I referred to the students. In my experience, students appreciate the focus on them rather than on their disability. In a similar vein, I also believe that students appreciate candor about their disability. A student who is blind usually does not require us to avoid that fact by using terms such as "visually challenged." My advice is to be sensitive to this issue and let the students be your guide. Ask them if they have preferences in this regard.

The goal of the ADA was to provide "otherwise qualified" individuals the opportunity to succeed in the workplace and classroom. It appears to be well on its way to meeting this goal, and more. Passage of the ADA not only mandates that we consider practices that constitute fairness for students with disabilities, but also encourages us to be conscientious in evaluating our classroom practices. That cannot be a bad thing!

Reference

Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (42 U.S.C. § 12101 et seq. (West 1992))