



# Invisible Disabilities and Postsecondary Education

## Accommodations and universal design

Many students on postsecondary campuses have disabilities that are not easily noticed. This situation can lead to misunderstandings. As articulated by Beatrice Awoniyi, director and assistant dean for the Student Disability Resource Center at Florida State University, “You may look at a student and you say, you know, you look like every other student in the class, what do you mean you need note-taking? What do you mean you need extra time on the test? It might not be apparent to you as a faculty member that a student has a disability, but that disability may impact their participation in the class.”

Sometimes, students with invisible disabilities are perceived as lacking in intelligence, or as not paying attention. That happened to Nate before he was diagnosed with a learning disability: “They’d look at me and they’d be like, oh, well, you’re faking, you’re playing around, you’re just not trying hard enough or something. But I was trying.” Another student, Jesse, states, “My father has learning disabilities and actually his mom does too, so there’s a history there and my parents kind of wondered if something was going on. But the school kept saying, ‘He’s just a little slow, he’ll pick it up.’ So by the end of second grade I still couldn’t read at all.”

### Types of Disabilities

Invisible disabilities include autism, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders (ADHD), learning disabilities, mental health disabilities, seizure disorders, tic-related disabilities such as Tourette’s, brain injuries, and more.

As medical understanding grows and educational design standards become more inclusive, there will be higher number of college students with invisible disabilities than in the past.

Invisible disabilities may affect the way a student processes, retains, and communicates information. Some common abilities affected include ignoring distractions and staying focused, understanding



unspoken or assumed expectations, having stamina for a full class load, working with others, prioritizing their workload, to name a few. Anxiety may make it difficult to take tests or to approach professors with questions. All people experience their disabilities uniquely. Students who have the same medical diagnosis for their condition may have different abilities and accommodation needs. It is important to work with each individual to figure out what’s best in a specific situation.

Professors may have safety concerns about students with particular disabilities, such as seizure disorders. It might feel to them like too much responsibility. However, as reported by Sharon Bittner, director of Academic Support Services at Des Moines Area Community College, “Students with seizure disorders often control their seizures well with medication, so [professors are] really not going to see frequent seizures in the classroom. It is important, however, for an instructor to know what to do in the event of a seizure. And if the student discloses and says, ‘I have a seizure disorder,’ then it’s very easy for the disability services officer to talk with the student and ask, ‘What would you like for your instructor to know?’”



There might also be concerns about disruptive behaviors. If possible, creating ways for students to continue to engage with class (virtually, from a separate space, etc) while they manage their otherwise-distracting needs can be extremely helpful, allowing all students to learn in the way that works best for them. If not possible, work with disability services to make sure all student needs are met. Audrey Smelser, counselor and disability specialist at National Park Community College, says that on her campus, “We would encourage faculty to refer those students who have some outburst in class to the counseling center for us to work with them on stress management and appropriate behaviors, just as we would any other student.”

Familiarity with common disabilities can help faculty feel more comfortable with a student’s occasional lack of social skills. Linda Walter, director of Disability Support Services at Seton Hall University, explains, “Sometimes students with autism don’t have the filter to be able to stop asking questions if there are certain things that they want to know. So they may monopolize a lot of class time and one of the things that we really try to work on is a signal where the professor can let the student know that, ‘You’ve asked enough questions, and I will help you, but it’s just not going to be now.’”



## Accommodations

Students with invisible disabilities may or may not need accommodations in a college classroom. If they do, it’s the students’ responsibility to self-disclose to disability services, follow procedures, and request accommodations. However, some students do not share about their disability or ask for accommodations. This can be because they are worried they will be judged, they don’t have the capacity to receive needed documentation for accommodations, or even just that they don’t know what options are available to them. Faculty can at least help the latter by including a statement on their class syllabus, inviting students to talk about any disability-related concerns. For example, “If you wish to discuss academic accommodations, please contact me as soon as possible” could be included. This will make students with disabilities more comfortable discussing accommodations.

College students with disabilities should contact the disabled student services office on campus before they start classes. Staff there will typically check documentation of the disabilities, determine appropriate accommodations, and give the students letters authorizing those accommodations. Beatrice Awoniyi explains, “What we look into is, how does that disability affect that specific person for that specific class? And then we make a determination of what types of accommodation will be reasonable and what will be appropriate. Not all accommodations are reasonable.”

An accommodation is not appropriate if it would

- make a substantial change in an essential element of the curriculum,
- alter course objectives,
- impose an undue financial or administrative burden to the institution, or
- pose a direct threat to the health or safety of others.

If an accommodation request seems unreasonable, a compromise could be discussed between the professor, the student, and the disabled student services staff. For example, as Rebecca Cory, manager of Disability Services at North Seattle



Community College, reports, “[At Wells College] I was working with a student who had Tourette’s syndrome, which is a disability that causes her to experience some physical and vocal tics. And this student was taking a chemistry class, and was working with a chemistry professor, and the professor was concerned that these physical tics may cause a hazard in the chemistry class, in the laboratory specifically. And so we worked with this professor and the student to get a lab situation that was not going to be a problem for the student. We replaced the glassware with plastic or Pyrex, and with Pyrex, and we paired the student with a lab partner she approved, so that if there was a chemical that the student might have difficulty handling, in case she had a physical tic during the handling of it, the lab partner would handle those specific chemicals. The student was still working in a situation that was safe, and she could learn what she needed to learn.”

Students with disabilities also have the right to confidentiality. If a student discloses to the professor, they should never discuss the student’s needs or abilities in front of other students. Furthermore, if a student appears to be struggling in class, but hasn’t requested accommodations, the professor is not advised to ask if a disability is involved. But there are acceptable ways to offer assistance. You could suggest resources on campus, such as tutoring or instructional centers, and include disabled student services as one of those resources.

A student may request accommodations for the classroom, assignments, and exams. Some commonly-requested classroom accommodations include

- seating near the door to allow taking breaks;
- alternative note taking: recording, note taker, or a copy of instructor’s notes; and
- early availability of syllabus and textbooks.

Assignment accommodations include

- advance notice,
- additional time for completion,
- feedback and assistance in planning workflow,
- choice of written or oral presentation, and
- postponement during hospitalization.

Accommodations for exams include

- alternate format: multiple choice, essay, oral, presentation, role-play, or portfolio;
- use of adaptive computer software such as speech recognition;
- extended time for test-taking;
- taking tests in a separate, non-distracting room; and
- a scribe, reader, or word processor for exams.

In some cases, accommodations may need to be coordinated between the faculty and student. For example, a medical student might eventually need to do clinical work. An individual discussion of options may be necessary.

## Universal Design of Instruction

Good teaching can minimize the need for accommodations. By using principles of universal design in your instruction, instructors can maximize learning for all students. Universal design means taking steps to effectively teach to a diverse audience. Expect students to have a wide range of identities, including their ethnic and racial background, gender, age, socio-economic status, native language, disability, and more.

Universal design strategies are usually not difficult to employ. For instance, as a course is designed, plan to offer several assignment options for students—they might write a paper, they might give a presentation, or they might put together a portfolio to meet a requirement in class. Providing multiple options allow students to choose what works best for their abilities.

Planning curriculum with universal design in mind can reduce the need for accommodations later, and that’s helpful for both faculty and students. Meryl Berstein, director of the Center for Academic Support at Johnson & Wales University, reports, “If you’re designing your class work so that it will be accessible to all students in class, it might take a little bit longer for you to do that initially. But the benefits of [preparing] to you, as well as to the student, will be reaped later. Because once you’ve done it, you’ve done it. You are not going to have to re-invent the wheel.”



Other elements of universal design that may be particularly helpful to students with invisible disabilities include

- multiple methods of delivery, including lectures, discussion, hands-on activities, online discussions, and fieldwork;
- providing printed materials and electronic resources that summarize or outline lecture content;
- encouraging a variety of ways for students to interact with each other and with you, such as in-class discussion, group work, one-on-one meetings, and online forum;
- providing feedback on assignments before the final deadline; and
- including questions on tests that require a variety of response types, such as multiple choice and essay.

As explained by Beatrice Awoniyi, “When we adopt the principles of universal design, we minimize the amount of accommodations that we’re going to need, and students who are in the class who have disabilities may not even have to ask for accommodations. Of course, that doesn’t mean that we’re not going to have anyone requesting accommodations; we just limit the number of accommodations that we have to provide.”

## Additional Resources

For more specific information about working with students who have disabilities, consult our website at [uw.edu/doit](http://uw.edu/doit). A complementary video was also made in 2011, which can be found here: [uw.edu/doit/videos/index.php?vid=36](http://uw.edu/doit/videos/index.php?vid=36)

The following websites provide tailored information on learning disabilities and mental health needs:

- LD OnLine  
[www.ldonline.org](http://www.ldonline.org)
- National Institute of Mental Health  
[www.nimh.nih.gov/](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/)

For more information on universal design in education, consult The Center for Universal Design in Education at [uw.edu/doit/CUDE](http://uw.edu/doit/CUDE); of particular relevance is the video and publication entitled *Equal Access: Universal Design of Instruction* at [uw.edu/doit/videos/index.php?vid=13](http://uw.edu/doit/videos/index.php?vid=13).

## About DO-IT

DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) serves to increase the successful participation of individuals with disabilities in challenging academic programs and careers, such as those in science, engineering, mathematics, and technology. Primary funding for DO-IT is provided by the National Science Foundation, the State of Washington, and the U.S. Department of Education.

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