

Working with Learning-Disabled Students: An Introductory Guide

At Washington College, we are dedicated to providing excellent learning opportunities to all of our students. Our students come from diverse backgrounds and have diverse learning styles. Some of our students have documented learning disabilities and others may have medical conditions that make some aspects of the collegiate environment more difficult for them to navigate successfully. Our Office of Academic Skills coordinates the College's efforts to serve students with learning differences effectively. Ultimately, however, it is the faculty who play the biggest role in ensuring that our classrooms serve all our students.

This guide addresses some of the most common policies, practices and questions surrounding teaching students with different learning styles.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How does the ADA affect postsecondary schools?

A: Title II of the ADA covers state funded schools such as universities, community colleges and vocational schools. Title III of the ADA covers private colleges and vocational schools. If a school receives federal dollars regardless of whether it is private or public it is also covered by the regulations of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act requiring schools to make their programs accessible to qualified students with disabilities.

Q: Who is responsible for determining appropriate accommodations?

A: The Office of Academic Skills is the office on campus that determines appropriate accommodations. The office bases its decision upon documentation collected from a student with a disability and the student's functional limitations. It is then the college's responsibility to work with the student to make reasonable modifications or provide appropriate services in a timely way.

Q: As a faculty member, how do I know when I need to provide accommodations to a student?

Students determined to be eligible for accommodations receive a letter describing those accommodations from Washington College's Office of Academic Skills. **It is the student's responsibility to provide a copy of the letter to his or her instructor in order to be eligible for accommodations.**

If a student requests accommodations from you but does not have such a letter, you should direct the student to the Office of Academic Skills. You should not arrange accommodations on your own for a student who has not received a letter from Academic Services.

Q: Are all students with disabilities registered with OAS?

Websites:

<http://www.pacer.org/pride/504.htm>

<http://www.ed.gov/ocr>

<http://www.aheadweb.org/home/pages>

Office of Academic Skills
2nd Floor, Miller Library
Ext. 7883

A: No, it is likely that many students with disabilities have chosen not to be registered with OAS for services. In this instance, faculty do not need to provide these students with accommodations. Students registered with the OAS will present faculty with an **accommodations letter to the professor.**

Q: How can I encourage students eligible for accommodations to take advantage of them?

At the college level, students have the responsibility to advocate for themselves. You can help create an atmosphere in which they feel welcome to do so. Placing a statement about accommodations for documented learning differences on your syllabus encourages students to speak to you about their learning disabilities. Making a brief statement on the first day of class indicating your support for accommodating such students also helps set a non-threatening tone.

Here's a sample syllabus statement:

Students with diagnosed learning disabilities or special needs requiring accommodation for this course must first contact the Office of Academic Services at x7883 (2nd Floor, Miller Library). Please do this as soon as possible so that we can have a conversation about your needs and the recommended accommodations. You are welcome to meet with me in my office hours to discuss these accommodations, and I encourage you to do so early in the term.

Q: Am I required to provide exam accommodations to students who request it?

A: Yes. Students with disabilities are protected by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504. This law requires that qualified students with disabilities get equal access to an education, and this includes exam accommodations.

Q: What if a student discloses a learning disability or an accommodation to me after doing poorly on an assignment?

It is the student's responsibility to seek out necessary accommodations prior to needing to use them. Once a student presents an accommodation letter to you, you should provide the appropriate accommodations, but you need not alter grades earned prior to that or allow a student to re-take a test or re-do an assignment for reason of not having disclosed a need for an accommodation.

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Q: What are some of the types of exam accommodations available to students with disabilities?

A: Some of these accommodations include but are not limited to: **extra time for exams** (usually 50% extra time but in some cases as much as double time), a reader or scribe (a person who writes answers verbatim), a computer, an exam scanned onto a disk and use of computer (student uses voice, enlargement options, or spelling/grammar check), or a **distraction-reduced space (provided in OAS)**.

Q: A student with a disability has requested that s/he take an exam at OAS. How do I know that my exam will be safe and that the student will get no unfair advantage?

A: OAS has worked with WC faculty to develop procedures for receiving and returning exams once the student has taken the exam. For delivering your exam, you can do one of the following: 1) *email a copy of your exam to OAS* or 2) *deliver the exam(s)* at least one day prior to test day to OAS (2nd Floor, Miller Library) in a sealed envelope.

The OAS will return the exam to you in one of two ways: 1) deliver exam to your mailbox in Smith Hall; or 2) you may pick up your exam(s) during OAS office hours (M-W 9-4pm; TH-F 9-3pm).

While students are taking the exam, they are monitored. Testing rooms have small windows to enable the Director to periodically view the students while they are taking tests.

Q: Do I have any recourse if I disagree about requested accommodations?

A: To clarify any disagreement about a requested accommodation, you can contact the OAS Director. The OAS is the College's designated office that serves as a liaison between students and faculty, and can advocate for *reasonable* accommodations.

Q: I hear a lot about different learning styles. How do I respond to a classroom full of students with diverse backgrounds, different levels of preparation, and different learning styles?

The guidelines called Universal Design of Instruction or Universal Design for Learning are based on the philosophy that pedagogical strategies that are good for learning disabled students are also helpful to all students. It takes its name from the concept of Universal Design in architecture: "Universal Design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design." The intent of universal design is to simplify life for everyone by making products, communications and the built environment more usable by as many people as possible at little or no extra cost. Universal Design benefits people of all ages and abilities.¹

Universal Design grew out of the experience that environments and products that were designed for people with special needs often turned out to be beneficial for everyone. For example, curb

¹ Ronald L. Mace, Universal Design Institute

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cuts and ramps designed for individuals in wheelchairs became useful for people on bicycles or people pushing strollers. Closed captioning, originally designed for deaf people, proved useful for people working out in gyms and for people learning a language.

In pedagogy, the movement argues that certain pedagogical practices are valuable because they make instruction and learning more accessible to all students, not just those with specific learning disabilities. See the separate handout on Universal Design for Instruction for an introduction to pedagogical strategies that make sense for all of us who teach classrooms with a wide array of learners in them.

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