

The Disabled Student and the Writing Program: A Guide for Administrators

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Much thought and effort has recently gone into making college campuses physically accessible for disabled students. Wheelchair ramps have appeared in front of buildings, drinking fountains have been lowered, restrooms and parking lots are clearly marked for handicapped access, and elevators now have Braille markings next to the floor buttons. Not as much attention, however, has been given to adjusting classroom practices to make learning itself more accessible to disabled students. Administrators need to give this matter their attention, not only because it is fair and just, but also because it is the law: institutions or programs receiving federal financial assistance are legally bound to set up "academic adjustments" in the classroom so that disabled students are not discriminated against in their efforts to learn ("Nondiscrimination"). Because of the format and labor-intensive nature of most writing classes, and because composition is the one class nearly every college student takes, writing program administrators in particular need one class nearly every college to plan for such academic adjustments in order to smooth the way for disabled students.

Before discussing what constitutes reasonable accommodation in the writing classroom, however, let us first clarify what is meant by the term "disabled." The most obvious type of disability is physical: the blind or deaf student, the mobility-challenged student in a wheelchair or with impaired muscle coordination. But there are other disabilities which are not so obvious. There are disabilities related to health: students with heart problems, for example, or with diseases like Lupus or Epstein-Barr, which are unpredictable and often bring about extreme fatigue. There are also disabilities related to treatable emotional disorders: the manic-depressive who used to be unable to function in a school environment is now able, thanks to medication, to attend classes. Finally, there are various learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, which we are just now beginning to understand and to learn to deal with in the college classroom.

What kinds of classroom accommodation are reasonable? A general guideline in working with disabled students is this: the student must achieve the goals and objectives of the course like any other student, but the process by which those goals are achieved may be modified to fit the student's particular abilities and needs. What we will do here is first

outline some issues that should be addressed in setting forth guidelines for teachers, and then discuss how to implement these guidelines in a writing program. (We have appended the guidelines distributed to all teachers at our institution.)

First, before anything else is done, the individual disabled student should be consulted about his or her needs. These students have usually developed individual coping strategies and are usually straightforward in discussing their needs when the instructor is honestly open to negotiating the process of instruction: how the student will receive instruction and demonstrate knowledge and competence. Not every disabled student will require accommodation; each should be consulted on a case-by-case basis.

Second, the issues of time and location should be addressed. It sometimes takes disabled students longer to complete assignments; last-minute changes in assignments or timed writing tasks create hardships for them. Teachers should be sure to give these students plenty of lead time, and in the case of in-class essays, arrange for them to have more time to complete the task. Sometimes students who work slowly might have to take incompletes and finish term papers during semester breaks. Students with chronic health problems sometimes miss class more often than the attendance policy would allow; teachers should work out ahead of time what such students need to do to make up the work missed. Some learning-disabled students find noise and movement very distracting or become hyperactive under stress and need to move around; such students will do better if allowed to work in private—in the teacher's office or in a nearby classroom—rather than in a group-editing configuration.

Third, the use of technology needs established guidelines. Some disabled students find it difficult to listen and take notes at the same time; the tape recorder is a natural device for them to use, and teachers need to accept such devices and to check with students occasionally to make sure the recordings are audible enough to be helpful. Blind students may need to bring Braille equipment on which to do their in-class writing so that they can then read it aloud to their teacher or to editing groups; sometimes special arrangements need to be made so that they can use that equipment comfortably—on a table rather than on a desk, for example. The advent of the microcomputer has been an enormous boon to disabled students; when at all possible, arrangements should be made for disabled students to use word processing programs (complete with spelling checker) for their written work. Technology can also be used to help disabled students in very simple ways. Blue, dittoed handouts, for example, are very difficult for visually-impaired and dyslexic students to read; sharp-contrast Xerox sheets are much better. Large type is helpful, too, for those teachers who have access to IBM typewriters, wordprocessors with various fonts, or enlarging copy machines.

Once such guidelines have been worked out, how can they be implemented in the writing classroom? The key to developing successful accommodation techniques has been, we have found, a close working relationship between the writing program administrator and an administrator in the office for disabled student services (DSS). (If such an office does not exist on every campus, there is usually someone in the student affairs office who handles support systems for disabled students.) This relationship can be mutually beneficial; the WPA can provide expertise about what is and is not acceptable accommodation in the writing classroom, and the DSS administrator can provide useful information about disabilities to educate the WPA and the composition faculty. We have appended to this paper a list of resources we have found useful.

Once a working relationship has been established, it is useful to invite the DSS representative to a faculty meeting or TA orientation to raise the issue of accommodation for disabled students. Most faculty are favorably disposed toward helping disabled students, but many do not know quite how to go about it; sometimes they feel embarrassed to ask. Sometimes they feel that by making allowances for some students they are not being fair to others. We have found that detailing various options helps faculty understand that they can make allowances for disabilities in ways that are fair to the other students in the class. We have also found that by going over the signs of dyslexia in some sample papers, faculty have been able to help identify students who have been heretofore undiagnosed, and we have been able to get those students to testing and special help.

After such a meeting, we have found it useful for scheduling and advising purposes to identify teachers who are willing to work with disabled students, particularly those who are willing to work with some of the students with disabilities that take more extra-curricular time (blindness, for example) so that we may arrange for them to work directly with the DSS office. These latter teachers sometimes need to go the extra mile, selecting texts early to allow time for them to be recorded, providing extra copies of assignments for tutors, scheduling extra conferences with students. Not all faculty are willing to spend the extra time, so it is useful to know before the semester begins which faculty you can depend on. Identifying teachers in this way can ease the registration process for disabled students.

Once teachers are identified, they need to understand not only the general guidelines for accommodating disabled students mentioned above, they also need to be aware of three issues of particular importance in the writing class. The first is the fact that, because of the emphasis on students' self esteem at the secondary level, disabled students have generally had limited experience with writing in high school—their

teachers have not wanted to embarrass them by asking them to do something they could not do easily. Allowances have been made for these students that have not always been in their best interests; their writing skills are, as a result, even less developed than the average first-year student. The second issue is the use of human resources in the classroom (interpreters, transcribers, readers, tutors, editors) to help disabled students. In a class with a lecture format, the use of such resources is fairly straightforward, but in a writing class invariably the question arises, who is doing the written work, the student or the helper? There is no easy way to answer this question, and the WPA needs to work closely with the teacher and the DSS office, establishing parameters for each particular case. In one instance, for example, a dyslexic student and her reader both enrolled for credit in a technical writing class. They sat together, he helped her in their editing group (reading her paper aloud for her), but they wrote on different topics for each assignment. Because the teacher monitored the written assignments from the rough to the finished stages, she knew that the work was definitely the dyslexic student's own. (This was, incidentally, a student who had learned to read just two years before, when she was nineteen years old.) Sometimes the WPA needs to remind teachers that we all need help with editing, and that disabled students simply need more help, in one way or another, than the rest; this should not obscure the fact that they can still compose.

Which brings us to a more controversial issue—alternatives to written composition. In a very few cases, writing teachers dealing with disabled students may sometimes have to accept compositions which are oral rather than written in their origins—ones which have been dictated to someone else to transcribe. When one thinks about it, however, this is not so controversial after all. This method is one used in business and government all the time; why shouldn't we allow some students a composing method that is standard procedure outside the academy? We are beginning to understand that there are multiple composing strategies that students can use successfully; this is in fact just one more strategy, different in manner rather than in kind. And as John Herum points out, contrary to what the present notions about the differences between oral and written speech might tell us, there is no evidence that dictation lowers the quality of the finished written product (10).

Once the guidelines are in place and teachers are working individually with disabled students, the WPA must be ready to work with the DSS office to counsel students and facilitate communication with teachers. Disabled students sometimes learn to be very good passive learners. Because the process-oriented composition class emphasizes active learning, such students find themselves in uncharted waters, needing reassurance as well as accommodation. A few disabled students have learned to be quite manipulative; a WPA must be ready to deal with situations

where students use their disabilities as excuses for not doing the work in the course or blame the teacher for not helping enough. A blind student, for example, simply refused to take advantage of the accommodation offered, missed class frequently, and did not turn in the required number of papers. A sighted student would fail in such a situation; the blind student did too. In another case, a learning-disabled student began to blame the teacher in a disruptive way, saying that her difficulties with writing were a result of his unclear instructions and his useless suggestions for revision. She was removed from the class and finished the semester through individual tutorials in the writing lab; we used a different tutor each time, so that she could not attach blame to any given authority and could focus instead on her own composing. In such cases, working in tandem with the DSS office is crucial, since the WPA needs to understand how much of the difficulty is due to real disability and how much is due to interpersonal or other factors.

But we do not want to end on a negative note. Working to help accommodate disabled students is not just a matter of complying with the law; it is also a matter of simple human concern. And like most human concerns with which we deal, it can have rewards far beyond the amount of work it may generate. To us, one of the most interesting by-products of working together to meet the needs of disabled students has been the informal faculty development that takes place as a result. We have been gratified by the interest teachers have shown in learning more about their students' disabilities and by the satisfaction they express in working with these students. It is a fact and not a truism that the disabled have much to teach us—about different learning and writing styles, about persistence, and about what we will call, for lack of a better word, courage.

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Appendix

Helping Students with a Disability: Some Guidelines for Teachers

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1. Last-minute assignments can cause serious hardship for handicapped students since it takes longer for them to obtain and use needed resources. Provide the student with a maximum amount of lead time for preparation of assignments.
2. When using charts, graphs, or other visual aids, try to provide an individual copy of information contained therein for the manually, visually, or hearing-impaired student. Read aloud all material written on the chalkboard or displayed via an overhead projector.
3. The disabled student may need another class member to take notes. The Disabled Student Service staff can give suggestions as to how to accomplish this.
4. When possible, offer to provide a copy of lecture outlines or notes for the manually, visually, or hearing-impaired student.
5. Generally, handicapped students should be allowed extra time to complete tests. Blind and learning-disabled students may take tests either orally or by typing responses to spoken or taped questions. The most appropriate method of administering a test depends on the student's disability and on the test content.
6. If a student is using a tape recorder, remember to speak clearly and toward the class.
7. Some legally blind students are not totally blind, so handouts should be in sharp black print on white paper. Dittos cannot be picked up by the special reading equipment used. Make written comments or grade marks on papers or exams with a black felt-tipped pen. Arrange for a designated sighted student to tell a visually-impaired student about class handouts.
8. When relocation of a classroom is necessary, a note on the chalkboard or door will not be seen by the visually-impaired student. Have a sighted student wait for the visually-impaired student to arrive and walk with him/her to the newly designated classroom. Allow extra time for the disabled student to reach the new classroom.
9. When providing direction to a blind student, talk first and then offer your arm. Do not pat working dogs or talk to them without permission from the owner.
10. Face the class when speaking to help the hearing-impaired student. Write key points on the chalkboard, and hand out class assignments on paper.
11. Be flexible about deadlines and attendance in developing grading schemes so as not to jeopardize the evaluation of a student with a chronic health problem.