5 Quick Tips For Faculty

1. Encourage students to disclose their disability as soon as possible by including a statement in your syllabus directing students to contact Disability Support Services, such as: If you are a student with a disability and believe you may need accommodations for this course, please notify me with a memo from Disability Support Services (DSS). Since accommodations are not retroactive, it is strongly recommended that you provide me with notification as early as possible in the term. To register with DSS, or if you have questions about disability accommodations, contact Disability Support Services at 410-704-2638, or visit the DSS office in the Administration Building, Room 232.

2. DSS is responsible for determining a student’s eligibility for accommodations and services. If the student hasn’t given you a memo from DSS, you should not provide accommodations on the basis of a disability, and the student should be referred to DSS.

3. As a faculty member you play an important role in providing accommodations. However, it should not be overly time consuming. DSS is a resource for you to facilitate the provision of accommodations. For example, the purpose of the DSS Testing Services Center is to assist faculty with implementing test accommodations. When helping a student with a disability with course work, you should provide assistance as you would for any student. If a student with a disability needs more help than you can reasonably provide, you can refer the student to DSS or another appropriate campus resource.

4. Information related to a student’s disability is confidential and protected under FERPA. The student should be afforded the opportunity to meet with you privately to discuss disability-related matters and should not be identified as having a disability in front of others.

5. Accommodations are designed to mitigate the effects of a disability so the student has an equal opportunity to meet the course standards, not to change or circumvent them. If a student with a disability cannot meet the course standards with accommodations, it may mean the student will not pass. Accommodations give students a chance to compete on a level playing field; they don’t guarantee success.

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As an instructor, do you know what to do if a student brings an animal into your classroom? Do you know the difference between a service animal, a service animal in training, and a comfort animal? A student brings them into the classroom? Can a student bring them into the classroom? It is important that faculty and staff know the difference between these types of animals, the two questions to ask to determine if the animal is a service animal, and how to handle a request for a comfort animal.

A service animal is an animal that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability. Service animals do not have to be licensed or certified, nor do they need to wear special identification. Students are permitted to be accompanied by their service animals in all areas of campus where students are allowed to go. Animals need to under the control of their handler with a harness or leash.

Service animals act as an auxiliary aid for the person with the disability, and the work or tasks performed must be directly related to the disability. Examples include guiding individuals with low vision, alerting individuals who are deaf to sounds, fetching items such as medicine, providing physical support with balance, alerting persons to impending seizures, etc.

While faculty may not ask about the nature or the extent of a student’s disability, they may ask two questions to determine if the animal is a service animal (and hence permitted in the classroom): 1. Is the animal required because of a disability? 2. What work or task has the animal been trained to perform?

With respect to service animals in training, students/individuals who are training service animals are afforded the same rights as a person with a service animal.

A comfort animal (also referred to as an emotional support animal or therapy animal) is an animal prescribed to an individual with a disability that provides comfort just by being with that person. The animal plays a part in the person’s treatment, such as alleviating the symptoms of anxiety. Because comfort animals are not trained to perform a specific job or task, they do not qualify as service animals. Comfort animals are permitted on campus only in the student’s residence hall. They are not permitted in other university buildings, including academic buildings, classrooms, labs, dining facilities, athletic facilities, student centers, etc.

Students with service animals should register with DSS. Students with comfort animals who live on campus are required to register with DSS. Please contact our office if you have any questions or concerns about animals in your classroom.
Mr. Zaks teaches courses on autism and disability issues, and he is the Manager of Programs and Education at the Hussman Center for Adults with Autism. He directs the College Orientation and Life Activities (COLA) program, providing tailored supports to Towson University students on the autism spectrum. Mr. Zaks has worked with autistic adults and adults with other disabilities since 2002.

Channel “special interests”

Many neurodiverse individuals are incredibly passionate about specific topics such as the history of batteries or cow behavior during rainstorms. While it isn’t O.K. to discuss these topics for long periods of time in the middle of class, the truth is that society needs cow experts and battery historians. Help the student channel these passions into expertise by pointing out the right direction: clubs, specialty courses, professional organizations, internships, and volunteer work related to the interest are just some options where it is usually appropriate for these special interests to take root and blossom.

Verbal processing can take time – or shut off altogether

Neurodiverse learners may need longer amounts of time to answer a question or to supply verbal information. Do not assume the student is unprepared or disengaged.

In fact, under pressure to spit out an answer, some students will lose the ability to speak completely. Skip it, move on, and then let the student demonstrate knowledge a different way – perhaps they can email you the answer later.

Sensory issues are real

For neurodiverse learners, the average classroom is a sensory zoo with bright lights, smelly gum, floral shampoo, clashing carpets, hanging papers, rattling papers. Not only are sensory issues distracting, they can be painful. Give the student a few minutes to deploy coping strategies, take a break, or change seats. Consider what you can do to make your classroom more sensory friendly, too.

Teach the social rules for your classroom

If someone has made it to college, the assumption is that they know how to operate in a classroom. But one thing we know is that intelligence is not correlated with social skills or common sense. How long is a turn to speak? How many questions are too many? What do you do if you are very upset? Any social feedback you can provide is helpful, just do so using concrete language and in private to protect the student’s dignity. For example, a simple statement such as, “I love the questions you ask in class. There’s enough time to take up to 2 of your questions. Beyond 2, please meet me during office hours instead,” can reduce frustration for both of you.

Ignore behavior that doesn’t matter

Some neurodiverse learners stand when listening to lectures, flip their hands when excited, look sideways when answering a question, or won’t use a certain color dry erase marker. Let it go, if it doesn’t disrupt the learning environment.

Check in if a student seems isolated

Have most of the students made friends? Are all the students getting together to study for the exam? If a neurodiverse student sits alone, isn’t included in the usual social flurries, and doesn’t seem to be included in peer study groups, offer to help. While some students want to strike out on their own, many neurodiverse learners just don’t know how to integrate themselves into student life. We know that students who are very isolated are at higher risk for mental health complications and academic failure. Facilitate an introduction, assign a peer study buddy, or ask a caring student to invite your isolated student along.

FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

Zosia Zaks, M.Ed., C.R.C., Visiting Instructor in the College of Health Professions, shares his tips for college professors when working with students on the autism spectrum.

DSS has developed a guide for faculty as a resource in teaching, accommodating and advising students with disabilities. Its purpose is to assist faculty in carrying out their central role in implementing the university’s commitment to providing access to all students. The guide includes information on various types of disabilities, characteristics of students with these disabilities, recommended accommodations, and suggestions for meeting students’ needs in the classroom. It also includes information on DSS and the Testing Services Center, both of which are additional resources for faculty.

Faculty Guide for Teaching and Accommodating Students with Disabilities

DSS students is extended test accommodation provided to faculty. The most common accommodations to students with disabilities on behalf of faculty. The most common categories of students with disabilities include those with medical disabilities, physical/ mobility impairments, spectrum disorder, brain injuries, vision and hearing impairments, speech disabilities, as well as students with various temporary conditions who need an accommodation.

Last year, the DSS Testing Services Center administered 4,309 individual tests with accommodations to students with disabilities on behalf of faculty. The most common accommodation provided to DSS students is extended test time (typically 1.5x).

During 2015-16, 1,664 students were registered with DSS, representing approximately 7 percent of Towson University’s student population. This represents a 4.9 percent increase over the previous year and a 26.5 percent increase over the past three years.

Most students registered with DSS have learning disabilities (511). Historically, this trend has remained consistent. The second largest group of DSS students are those with mental health disabilities (366) and ADHD (321) respectively. Other categories of students with disabilities include those with medical disabilities, physical/mobility impairments, spectrum disorder, brain injuries, vision and hearing impairments, speech disabilities, as well as students with various temporary conditions who need an accommodation.

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Many students are not diagnosed with a disability until college because they have found ways to cope until now when the workload and academic demands increase, or because symptoms sometimes don’t develop until the college years. DSS can talk with the student to determine if a professional evaluation is needed to diagnose a disability and provide appropriate recommendations to best help the student.

If a student shares that they suspect a disability or have received services in the past, the student should be referred to DSS. We can then review whether the student’s accommodations need to be adjusted or if they are in need of other services.

Our thanks to the Southern Methodist University DASS who served as the basis for this article.