



This information is being provided to ensure that members of the Cornell Faculty are well-informed about federal disability laws and strategies to support students with disabilities.

*Learn more about
teaching students with
disabilities*



The *Faculty Resource Guide to Teaching Students with Disabilities* has information about types of disabilities and their impact on student learning. The guide also has suggestions for inclusive instructional strategies that help all learners and reduce the potential need for individual accommodations.

The guide, along with previous editions of this Bulletin and other helpful information, can be found on the SDS website at sds.cornell.edu/faculty

Students on the Autism Spectrum

The focus for faculty working with students with disabilities has primarily been on providing “reasonable accommodations” that will afford a student with equitable access to educational opportunities. The growing number of students enrolled in college with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and social communication difficulties often face problems in the classroom that are not readily solved by typically used accommodations.

Individuals on the Autism Spectrum experience deficits in social and interpersonal skills, organization, and self-advocacy. They often have difficulty making eye contact, starting and ending conversations, and understanding personal space. Persons with ASD do not naturally interpret verbal and non-verbal social cues, especially in social situations. Sarcasm and figures of speech are typically difficult for them to understand. They are frequently overloaded by sensory input such as bright lights, crowded rooms, and noise, especially when in socially-pressured situations. Persons with ASDs may also have considerable academic ability and are capable of intense focus on a specific area of interest (Wolf, Thierfeld Brown, Bork & Shore, 2004).

Learning and living at a university is a social endeavor that can be quite challenging for persons on the autism spectrum. By understanding this condition, recognizing these characteristics in our students, and taking steps to build an inclusive classroom environment, students with ASD will have the opportunity to thrive.

Challenges in the Classroom for Students with ASD

Classroom interactions, such as study groups and group projects, are often difficult for students on the autism spectrum to navigate. The inability to negotiate or to initiate a discussion or to know when to stop talking, along with perfectionist tendencies, often cause difficulty for both the student with ASD and fellow students who may resent or refuse to work with a student with such challenges. By pre-assigning the groups, you will be able to match up the student with ASD with classmates you think s/he will have a chance of working with successfully. Require that each group assign tasks to each member so that expectations are clear. Explicitly state how the grade will be assigned. Students with ASD are often naïve, and many have been bullied, which raises further stress about working in a group.

Autistic students may interrupt during lectures, monopolize office hours or send email messages that go beyond an acceptable amount of content and frequency. People with ASD respond well to rules and a direct exchange about expectations. To manage the number of comments made in class, establish a classroom rule that all students can only make 2 comments per class. If a student is monopolizing office hours, set a time limit for each student’s questions. A greater concern is that students with ASD will not use office hours to avoid the social interaction. Virtual office hours may be a more effective way to provide instructional support.

Behavioral Signs of Autism Spectrum Disorders/ Social Communication Deficits (Kenworthy, L., 2013)

What looks like “won’t”	May actually be “can’t”
Oppositional, stubborn	Cognitive inflexibility
Could do it if s/he wants to	Difficulty shifting
Self-centered	Impaired social cognition
Doesn’t try	Poor initiation, impaired planning and org.
Won’t put ideas on paper	Poor fine motor skills, disorganization
Sloppy, erratic	Overloaded, poor self-monitoring
Won’t control outbursts	Overloaded, dis-inhibition
Prefers to be alone	Impaired social problem solving
Doesn’t care what others think	Impaired understanding and production of nonverbal social cues

The Use of a Computer as an Accommodation

A variety of disabilities can affect a student's ability to write. Chronic medical conditions can cause difficulty with finger grasp or fatigue. Some learning disabilities affect a student's ability to write or to select words quickly, which will impede taking notes by hand. Graphomotor problems are often associated with Autism Spectrum Disorders, tremor disorders and the effects of a stroke or brain injury.

In the process of identifying appropriate accommodations for a student, the SDS counselor is trying to find a solution that affords the student the opportunity to participate as fully as possible in the academic experience. While SDS will provide a note taker for students who are unable to take notes in a class because of a disability, using a computer for note taking is a much better option for those who can take their own notes using technology.

Many courses have banned the use of computers in the classroom. We are often asked how to allow computer use as an accommodation without making it obvious that it is a disability accommodation. A universal design approach is for the instructor to invite all students who believe they need to use a computer for note taking to make this request. There may be students who are not registered with SDS who have a legitimate need to use a computer. Guidelines for their use can be established to reduce distraction. As class members observe students using computers, they will not necessarily associate the use as a disability accommodation.

In some courses, students have been asked to use computers in the back or at the side of the room. Some students may have a disability-related reason for sitting in the front of the room. For example, sitting close to the instructor is essential for students who have hearing, vision or attention disabilities. By giving the instruction that computers can only be used for note taking, students should be afforded the same seat selection options as other students, unless it can be demonstrated that using a computer in class is infringing on the learning experience of others.

Do faculty members have a choice about whether to accommodate a student who provides timely notice of the need for academic accommodations?

Yes, but *only* if the listed accommodation(s) would result in a fundamental alteration of the course or program. A "fundamental alteration" is a change that is so significant that it alters the essential nature of the learning experience for the student with a disability or for other students in the course or program. Any modification to approved accommodations should be made in consultation with SDS to ensure compliance with disability law.

One of the challenges associated with accommodating students on a large campus with diverse course offerings is making decisions about reasonable accommodations for a broad range of courses and circumstances. For example, a student who needs an assistive listening device (ALD) in a large lecture course may not find the ALD useful in a small seminar course. A student with a chronic medical condition may feel well one semester and attend classes regularly and the next semester may have a flare up and need attendance flexibility. For this reason, having discussions with students about the academic adjustments needed in your course is an important component of ensuring disability access for students.

If you believe that an accommodation that is specified in a student's accommodation letter is not appropriate for your course, contact the SDS staff person who provided the letter to the student so that an evaluation of the access needs of the student can be made as it relates to essential requirements of your course.

Exam Accommodations: Communicating with Students

When communicating by email with more than one student about exam arrangements, be sure to use the BCC feature and avoid the use of individual names in the message. Doing so will protect the privacy of the students. Even though they may see the other students in the exam room, the decision about sharing names and e-mail addresses should be theirs.



Are Your TAs in the Accommodations Loop?

Students with disabilities are instructed to deliver accommodation letters to their primary instructors of the course because the instructor is responsible for ensuring students have equal access in their courses. For courses where students may also need to be accommodated in sections or labs, or when TAs hold quizzes or exams, TAs need to be informed about accommodations.

- Convey accommodation information to your TAs in a confidential manner.
- If attendance flexibility is an accommodation, assist the TA in determining a reasonable number of absences without altering fundamental elements of the course. Communicate that number to the student.



If you have questions about these or any other accommodations, do not hesitate to contact the SDS staff. Our goal is to help identify effective solutions for barriers to equal access caused by disabilities.

Student Disability Services

Katherine Fahey, Director (kf75)
Michele D. Fish, Associate Director (mdf6)

420 CCC
t. 607-254-4545
e. sds_cu@cornell.edu
w. sds.cornell.edu