

Working with Students Who Have a Learning Disability

Learning disabilities vary in form and severity. Learning disability is a term that refers to a group of differences.

The best way to understand an individual's needs is to engage in a private conversation with them. **Questions you might ask include:**

- What barriers do you experience in a classroom?
- What are the accommodations that help you access the content, the class, the environment?
- How can we create an accessible experience for these elements of the class? (addressing the different types of experiences you create in your class- small groups, large groups, presentations, projects, tests/quizzes, papers, field trips, etc.)

Individuals with learning disabilities have different accommodation preferences and needs. There are many ways of accessing information and environments.

A learning disability affects the manner in which individuals take in information, organize it, retain it and express the knowledge and understanding that they possess.

Accommodations may include, but are not limited to:

- Extended time on tests
- Least-restrictive testing environment
- Alternative testing arrangements
- Readers/ scribes
- Notetakers
- Use of assistive technology (e.g., electronic textbooks)

If you would like verification that a student has a disability, ask the student to provide you with a letter from the Disability Services Office (DSO). The DSO produces these letters only for students who are registered with the office and for whom documentation of the disability is on file. The DOS can send you this letter directly.

As a professor seeking to support a student with a learning disability, you are asked to:

- Consider **beginning each class with a review** of the previous lecture and an overview of the topics to be covered. Emphasize important points, main ideas, and key concepts during the lecture and in the summary at the close of the class. **Provide a suggested time line** when making long-range assignments and suggest appropriate checkpoints. Comprehension and integration of information is better when we know what to expect, when information is presented in logical sequence, and when important concepts are summarized and reviewed.
- **Consider presenting course content in more than one modality.** For example, a student who has difficulty processing information auditorily may understand and remember the material more thoroughly if it were shown on an overhead projector or in a "hands-on" activity to supplement the lecture. Present material both orally and in writing.
- Make sure that handouts, printed material and whiteboard writing are **visually clear and well sized** to compensate for visual-perceptual difficulties.
- Consider **providing syllabi prior to the start of the term**, so that students can begin the readings before the class begins and/or arrange for textbooks to be scanned or recorded.
- There may be a need for students to plan ahead for out-of-class assignments so it is particularly important to provide a **detailed syllabus that includes all assignments and due dates.**
- Consider composing exams in a way that makes them accessible for students:

Make sure that exams are **clearly written or typed**, in large black letters or numbers, with spaces between lines and with double or triple spaces between items.

To avoid visual confusion, **avoid putting too many questions or math problems on to one page.** Consider putting questions on only one side of the paper.

Group similar types of questions together. For example, all true/false, all multiple choice, all short answer. Leave several spaces between multiple choice items.

Allow students the choice to circle answers in the test booklet rather than darkening circles on a Scantron sheet.

Allow students to use extra paper in preparing answers to essay questions or to write on test booklets when considering test answers.

Suggest that **math students use graph paper** (or lined paper turned sideways) to encourage neatness and avoid confusion when performing math calculations.

- **Provide frequent opportunities for feedback:** for example, weekly quizzes on assigned reading, instructor review of early drafts of essays, and/or error-analysis of tests. If a student's written exams seem far inferior to the student's class work, consider meeting during your office hours for a discussion of the exam questions. This discussion can give you a better idea of what the student really knows and how you can help the student produce better exams or other written work.
- **Encourage students to contact you in order to clarify assignments.** You might suggest that students re-phrase the assignment and send the re-phrased version to you via email. You can then reply via email, confirming that the student has understood the assignment or correcting misunderstandings.
- **Be sensitive to students who, for disability-related reasons, may be unable to read aloud or answer questions** when called on. If students make you aware of these difficulties, you and the students can discuss other ways they can meaningfully participate in class sessions.
- **Periodically check in with the student *privately*** to make sure that all class content is being accessed.
- **Don't hesitate to call the Disability Services Office (DSO)** to arrange for a three-way meeting between you, a disability services personnel member, and the student to work out any issues and to collaborate on the best instructional strategies for the student.