

The Student with a Disability:

A Guide for Faculty and Students at Liberty University

Created

By

**The Office of Disability Academic Support
(Part of the Center for Academic Support and Advising Services)**

Demoss Hall, Room 2016

(434) 582-2159

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Introduction

Graduating from a college or university is a most worthy goal to accomplish for anyone. It takes a great deal of discipline, study, motivation, self-sacrifice, ability, time, and financial resources. It is the dream of a majority of all Americans. For Christians, it can be a way to polish the gifts which God has given to His people, so they can serve Him in a more effective manner.

Although colleges and universities are enrolling students with disabilities and have done so for years, there remains a great deal of confusion and lack of knowledge concerning these students. As the percentage of this minority population grows in higher education, so does the need for information on how to best accommodate these students.

Out of concern for students with disabilities and fellow faculty members alike, this guide was developed. It will briefly discuss some of the most significant issues facing faculty and students with disabilities.

Definition of a Disability

A disability is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities such as walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, working, or learning. Also, a history of such disability or the belief on the part of others that a person has a disability, whether it is so or not, is also recognized as a disability by federal regulations.

Individuals with disabilities may include people who have conditions such as, but not limited to, the following:

- Blindness or visual impairment
- Cerebral palsy
- Chronic illnesses such as AIDS, arthritis, cancer, cardiac diseases, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy
- Psychiatric disabilities
- Deafness or hearing impairment
- Epilepsy or seizure disorders
- Orthopedic impairment
- Specific learning disability

- Speech disorder
- Spinal cord or traumatic brain injury

Qualified Person with a Disability

A “qualified person with a disability” is defined by the law as someone who meets the academic and technical standards required for admission or participation in the university’s programs and activities.

Secondary vs. Postsecondary Law

In high school, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) regulates services for a student with a disability. The emphasis is on the schools’ responsibility to identify and provide accommodations for the student with a disability. The special education teachers are to draw up Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for the student and try to help the student meet the academic goals.

At the college level, however, there is an entirely different set of circumstances governed by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Now the responsibility shifts from the school to the student. A student must find the service providers on campus, provide documentation of the disability, and request accommodations, if needed. If new documentation is needed, the student must bear the cost of testing. Each student must become a self-advocate. The university is responsible for providing the student with reasonable accommodations, but it is the student who must prove eligibility and request services.

Office of Disability Academic Support

Under the umbrella of the Center for Academic Support and Advising Services, the Office of Disability Academic Support was created to coordinate academic support services for Liberty University students who have documented disabilities.

Location

The Office of Disability Academic Support is located in the Demoss Hall, room 2016. The Hands of Liberty Deaf Department is also in the same location within the Center for Academic Support and Advising Services.

Mission Statement

To promote academic achievement and advocacy for students with disabilities.

Service Providers

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The Law and Institutional Responsibilities

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL 93-112), as amended by the 1981 regulations implementing the act, prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability against people in institutions benefiting from federal funds. This includes institutions (such as Liberty) which receive federal monies indirectly such as tuition and dormitory fees paid with federal grants or loans (Lazarus, 1989). Institutions that are judged to be negligent can lose all forms of federal assistance.

Section 504 mandates “reasonable” accommodations to provide equal program access to all students with disabilities. “Academic requirements must be modified on a case by case basis, to afford qualified handicapped students and applicants an equal educational opportunity” (Anderson & McGuire, 1993, p.2). Faculty must provide accommodations that meet the special needs of each student with a disability. Developing reasonable accommodations is a real challenge for everyone involved.

Reasonable Accommodations ("Leveling the Playing Field")

Any discussion of accommodating the needs of students with disabilities must center on the concept of equality. Scheiber and Talpers (1985) stated, "Support services do not give disabled students an advantage over others; they merely enable disabled students to overcome the disadvantages with which they would otherwise begin" (p.94).

The university has an obligation to make reasonable accommodations in policies, practices or procedures when accommodations are needed to prevent discrimination on the basis of disability **unless** making the accommodation would fundamentally alter the nature of the service, program or activity, or would result in undue financial and administrative burdens.

Characteristics of Reasonable Accommodations

- The process must be an interactive one involving a reasonable reciprocal effort on the part of both parties.
- The university is not required to provide specifically what the student requests. An alternative accommodation may be provided if it is effective.
- The university must be given a reasonable amount of time to evaluate requests and to offer the necessary accommodations.
- The university does not have to provide accommodations that will impose "undue administrative or financial burden."
- Determining what is reasonable requires one to balance two important rights: the student's rights to be provided meaningful access and the university's right to protect the integrity of its programs and services. (Heyward and Associates, 2001)

Student Responsibilities

Documentation of the Disability

It is the student's responsibility to disclose the disability. If the student fails to do so, obviously professors and others are not obligated to accommodate the disability. Before the accommodation process can begin, the student with a disability **must provide satisfactory written documentation** of the disability to the Office of Disability Academic

Support (DH 2016). Costs associated with documentation of a disability are the responsibility of the student.

Accommodation Requests

A student who requests accommodations is required to sign a waiver form entitled “Release of Information Permission Form” *each semester* giving Disability Support Staff permission to send written summaries of the individual’s disability, as well as the requests for accommodations. Then, each student is instructed to individually seek a private meeting with professors to discuss any accommodations that may be necessary.

Professors only need to arrange for those accommodations which have been identified. The student then should assume the responsibility for implementing the accommodations. For instance, a student who requests to take tests in the Tutoring/Testing Center (TE 128) should remind each professor one or two classes before each test occurs.

Tutoring/Testing Center – Accommodations

For all disability accommodation requests (i.e. quieter environment, extended time, oral testing) the Tutoring/Testing Center (TE 128) is the officially designated place for all tests administered outside of the regular classroom. A student with a disability must make such a request through the Office of Disability Academic Support (ODAS) in DH 2016. A professor does have the right to administer a test in another location at their discretion; however, the testing environment must meet the criteria spelled out in the Disability Academic Support memo sent from ODAS for each student with a disability.

Faculty Advisors for Students with Disabilities

When students notify the Office of Disability Academic Support that they have a disability, they can be assigned to a disability faculty advisor who has the job of coordinating services of the university for these students. As stated previously, with written permission of the students, written notifications of the disability and classroom modification requests are sent at the start of every semester to each requested professor.

Because many students with disabilities have poor organizational skills, students are e-mailed notices of university deadlines. These notices include advisor’s office hours, professor notification; drop/add period, and preregistration.

Advisors

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Confidentiality of Disability Information

It is the policy of the Office of Disability Academic Support to keep confidential all information pertaining to a student's disability and to disclose such information only to the extent necessary for affected faculty members and staff. A student must sign the "Release of Information Permission Form" in order for the disability staff to notify faculty of student's disabilities.

Grievance Procedures

A student with a documented disability who has a complaint regarding the university's compliance with an academic accommodation has the right to file a grievance. The student should meet with his/her assigned disability advisor to discuss his/her concerns. If the student feels that the issue has not been adequately addressed at this level, the student may meet with the Director of Disability Academic Support. The director can then communicate with the particular faculty member in an effort to resolve the matter. If the matter remains unresolved, the chairman of the specific academic department will then be consulted. The Executive Director of the Center for Academic Support and Advising Services will be the next contact in the procedure. The Provost of the university will be informed of the proceedings and will have ultimate authority in the matter.

Survival Tips

1. Doing your best in college must be a high priority in your life.
2. Learn the services available at Liberty to help you with problems.
3. Learn Liberty's system of adding and dropping classes, auditing classes, grade point requirements, and registration.

4. Take fewer classes, especially your first year, and balance easy classes with difficult ones. Plan on possibly taking longer than four years to graduate.
5. Because you may have trouble with reading or writing, you may receive lower grades than other students but feel you know more. That is probably true, but something you may have to endure.
6. Find a quiet study area that gives you the best working conditions.
7. Don't skip classes.
8. Participate in class.
9. Sit up front.
10. Deal with writing difficulties early. Have someone proofread your papers.
11. Organize your time.
12. Allow plenty of study time.
13. Be prepared for disbelief and lack of awareness by some professors.
14. Get a tutor from the Tutoring/Testing Center in Teacher Education Room 128.

Tips on Self-Advocacy

Communicating your needs effectively involves a number of factors. Students with disabilities who succeed in college generally possess the following characteristics.

- Ability to articulate one's talent and abilities clearly.
- Knowledge of the nature of one's disability, and the kinds of teaching strategies, tools, and services, which best help one compensate.
- Ability to explain both talents and needed compensatory strategies, clearly and frankly, to others.
- Maturity and initiative to assume the greater share of one's own advocacy.
- Adherence to effective, routine study habits, to whatever degree is necessary for success.
- Acceptance of and initiative to seek assistance for academic and other problems, as appropriate.
- Acceptance of the idea that it may take longer to graduate than one's friends, and that he/she may have to study harder than friends do.

- Recognition of the concept that postsecondary education is meant to be a challenge and that temporary frustrations are a part of the normal growth process.
- Regular, frequent communications with parents, friends, professors, academic advisors and support service personnel are all part of taking responsibility for one's ultimate success.

It has also been observed that the college-level student with a disability must be self-reliant and able to cope with ever-changing challenges of daily living. A student with a disability who has come to rely heavily on both parents and teachers to direct him/her and manage his/her life may have difficulty adjusting to the demands of a university. Thus, as a student, the task is to find ways to work with the chosen university that will permit the student to stretch and develop talents, interests, and abilities while at the same time being respectful and supportive of needs (Virginia Department of Education, Student Services, 1993).

References

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