



teaching learning committee
Montana State University Bozeman

Tips and Strategies For Working with Students with Disabilities

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In 1973, the U.S. Congress passed landmark legislation which dramatically expanded rights and opportunities for persons with disabilities in this country. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the first national civil rights legislation ever enacted for persons with disabilities, mandated that recipients of federal funds accommodate the needs of the disabled. MSU, as a recipient of federal money, was among hundreds of colleges and universities nationwide required under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act to make its facilities and programs accessible to persons with disabilities. Like most institutions, MSU did little to comply with the requirements of Section 504 during the first five years after enactment. In 1978, however, the year by which Section 504 regulations had mandated compliance; MSU established the office of Disabled Student Services. With that move and the subsequent completion of a Section 504 institutional self-study, MSU-Bozeman became the first unit in the Montana University System to attend seriously to the post-secondary education needs of disabled persons.

After the establishment of Disabled Student Services on campus, students began to trickle in. At first, we attracted mostly wheelchair users, and then visually impaired students and a few with chronic health problems. Later came students with hearing impairments, psychological disabilities, and droves of students with specific learning disabilities. From that first trickle of students with disabilities in 1978, the population of students with disabilities identified and served by Disabled Student Services has now grown to more than 250.

While, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 summarized above is one of the laws DSS falls under, the law most associated with disabled students is the Americans with Disability Act of 1990 (ADA). Under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, government agencies and recipients of federal funds (such as MSU) were prohibited from discriminating on the basis of disability. With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, a much more inclusive piece of legislation, that prohibition was extended to include the private sector. MSU now falls under both the Rehabilitation Act and the ADA. Although the ADA has expanded civil rights protection at MSU and other postsecondary institutions in some ways, most notably in the area of

telecommunications, it hasn't significantly changed MSU's responsibilities in terms of program access for students. Like Section 504, the ADA requires that MSU make appropriate adjustments and modifications in order to allow full participation of students with disabilities. Though the ADA may have slightly strengthened the institution's resolve, MSU had been making such adjustments and modifications for many years prior to the passage of the ADA.

It is also important to understand the definition of a disability and what the law requires DSS offices across higher education to look for in their review of disability claims. According to Section 3 of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), the term "disability" means, with respect to an individual,

- A. having a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual;
- B. having a record of such an impairment; or
- C. being regarded as having such an impairment.

Otherwise Qualified Applicant: A student who provides Disabled Student Services with sufficient evidence of disability to meet the standards established by the ADA or Section 504 is eligible for appropriate accommodations and services at MSU-Bozeman, provided the student is an otherwise qualified applicant. (In this case, the term "applicant" means both an applicant for admission to the university and an applicant for enrollment in a specific course of study.)

In order to be considered an otherwise qualified applicant, a student with a disability must be capable, either with or without accommodations, of fulfilling the essential requirements of a program of instruction (i.e., a class, major, or degree program).

Working with students with disabilities can be best described as tips and strategies. There is no correct or exact way to describe working or teaching students with disabilities as each student brings in their own set of unique circumstances. What we like to say is that we deal with each student on a case-by-case basis. However, I can provide some tips and strategies that will provide a general overview on working or teaching students with disabilities.

Hearing Impairments

- Find out how the person best communicates.
- Gain the student's attention before starting a conversation.
- Use a pencil and paper to communicate thoughts.
- Remember that body language is important.

- Try to match your facial expressions and body language with what you are saying. For example, if you are angry and saying angry words, show that anger on your face.
- Face the student when speaking.
- Use written assignments, lab instructions, and demonstration summaries.
- Use visual aids.
- Consider using e-mail to communicate
- Repeat questions and statements from other students.

If the Person Lip-reads

- Speak in a normal, unexaggerated manner. Simple, short sentences are best.
- Provide a clear view of your mouth; consider lighting.

Communicating through an Interpreter

- Address the person with the hearing disability, rather than the interpreter!
- Ask the student to introduce you to the interpreter.
- Ask for a brief explanation of the interpreter's role in the classroom.
- Discuss with the student and interpreter what seating arrangements will be most suitable.
- Let the interpreter know when any audio-visual equipment will be used. If low light conditions are used for films or slide presentations, the interpreter may need to request a lamp. DSS can assist you to meet this request.
- Ask for clarification if the interpreter voices the student's remarks in an unintelligible manner. Similarly, if the instructor speaks too fast during class, if someone speaks inaudibly, or if several people talk at once, the interpreter will not be able to provide a clear interpretation to the student.
- Ask the interpreter if he or she can provide assistance after class should you wish to speak with the hearing impaired student; the interpreter may have other obligations.
- Although it is generally permissible for the student and interpreter to clarify some brief remark, signed, spoken, or spelled during the class time, they should not have private conversations with each other during class.

Learning Disabilities

- Consider providing course and lecture outlines.
- Contemplate incorporating visual, aural, and tactile demonstrations into your instruction

Mobility Impairments

- Make certain that field trips take place in accessible locations.
- Contact the Disabled Student Services office if you are unable to provide necessary special equipment.

Speech Impairments

- Give complete, unhurried attention when talking to someone who has difficulty speaking.
- If understanding the person is troublesome, don't simply pretend to understand. Ask the student to repeat what was said. If this doesn't work, use writing as an alternative form of communication.
- If distracting noise makes it more difficult to understanding the person, move to a quieter location.
- Be patient and do not speak for people. Let them complete their own sentences.
- When necessary, ask short questions that require short answers (or a nod, or shake of the head)

Vision Impairments

If a person has low vision:

- Provide seating where the lighting is best.
- Consider using an electronic format for class assignments.
- Use large print for handouts. (The Disabled Student Services office can assist.)
- Describe visual aids that are used in class.

If a person is blind:

- Offer your services by asking, "May I help you?"
- Ask the blind person if he or she would like to take your arm when walking together; the motion of your body will tell him or her what to expect.
Be specific when giving directions.
- Place the blind person's hand on the back or arm of a chair and say, for example, "Your hand is on the left arm of the chair," when directing him or her to a seat.
- Speak to a person who is blind the same way you would to anyone else.
- Say the name of the person to whom you are speaking when conversing in a group.
- If you move during a conversation with a blind person, indicate where you are so that the person may face you.

- Obtain permission before interacting with someone's guide dog.
- Identify who you are and what your job or role is. Several introductions may be necessary before the blind person is able to recognize you by your voice.
- Introduce anyone who is with you and give any pertinent information about them. For example, "On my right is Lucy Smith. She is vice-president."

Wheelchair Etiquette

- Relax and make eye contact.
- Sit down when possible to give the person a more comfortable viewing angle.
- Ask before helping, and don't provide the assistance until your offer has been accepted. Listen to any instructions the person may want to give.
- Make sure the person is ready before you start pushing the wheelchair.
- Don't lean on the person's chair or put your feet on it. Many view such behavior as overly intrusive.

In summary, there is no one correct way to work with students with disabilities. But hopefully the tips and strategies from our Web-site can offer a starting point.