

Enabling Disabled Students

By Diane Makar Murphy and John T. Murphy

Harry and Alice arrived a little later than the rest of the students. Alice made her way to an empty desk, pulled Harry along, then waited while he sat down. Then she plopped herself onto the floor next to him. Alice is a dog and her job (like the job of those of us in education) is to guide a student—in this case, Harry. One of this article's authors, who, at the time, was the professor of Harry's Introduction to Theatre class, turned out to be much less adept in that same capacity.

Thinking on his feet, the professor did fairly well adapting assignments for a student with a disability. But, in the final analysis, thinking on one's feet is not a good substitute for preparation, as this professor learned when Harry took on an assignment with a theater crew.

Though dubious when he heard Harry had volunteered to be sound board operator—after all, cueing tapes to the proper spot is a visual process—the prof let doubts take a

backseat to other pressing concerns. There was a set to design, lessons to plan, other students, and other problems.

The prof assured himself an assistant would help Harry do a good job. When the curtain rose, Alice waited patiently as her owner-turned-sound board operator, prodded on dutifully by another student, played the cues. The sound went off without a hitch.

But all was not well. Harry's assignment, the professor dolefully—and belatedly—noted, had entailed pushing a button throughout the night at the direction of his helper. Harry hadn't exactly garnered a premium educational experience. The professor, on the other hand, gained immeasurably. He learned to prepare ahead for students with special needs.

An individual with a disability is a person with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a "major life activity," according to the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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A disability may include difficulty in caring for oneself, walking, seeing, or hearing. It can also impact breathing, learning, working, and performing manual tasks.

A disability may even include limited activity resulting solely from the negative reaction of others to the impairment.¹ HIV is unfortunately an excellent example of this.

Other impairments include specific learning disabilities and certain physical and mental conditions, as well as some diseases and addictions.²

In the years to come, as efforts to remove architectural and curriculum barriers at the postsecondary level progress, faculty and staff can expect to see greater numbers of students with myriad disabilities entering college. Challenged students may increasingly see a higher education as a likely means of expanding employment opportunities as well as independence.³

Faculty must prepare for the inevitable encounter with disabled students. There are moral imperatives for preparing appropriate lessons, as illustrated above, and there are legal ones as well.

Federal law requires reasonable accommodations for the dis-

abled in both private and public colleges and universities. *The Americans With Disabilities Act* (ADA) is a “clear and comprehensive national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities.”

State and local governments can lose federal funding if found in violation of the ADA. Additionally, individuals have the right to sue in federal court, which may result in an award of equitable damages, including admission or reinstatement to a program or activity, or assurance of future nondiscrimination.⁴

Suits can also be filed by the U.S. Attorney General, who may seek penalties. States can also be sued.

State and local governments must run their programs so that, when viewed in their entirety, they are readily usable by individuals with disabilities.

Both public and private institutions are required to make reasonable modifications in policies, practices, and procedures—including furnishing auxiliary aids and services when necessary to ensure effective communication.

Private schools must remove barriers from existing facilities when such removal is readily achievable, and, when it is not, provide an effective alternative.

Neither private nor public insti-

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tutions may keep people with disabilities from participating in a service, program, or activity simply because they have a disability.

Standards or rules that deny individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to enjoy a particular program or activity must be eliminated—unless the standards are essential. Vision, for instance, would be considered essential for driving.

Public institutions must provide programs and services in an integrated setting, unless separate or different measures are necessary to ensure equal opportunity.

College faculty need to understand the meaning of “equal opportunity,” taking care to differentiate it from “equal treatment.”

Some well-intentioned instructors balk when called upon to provide equal opportunity to disabled students. They're concerned that treating students with disabilities “specially” makes them stand out from the pack—and the “special” treatment makes the disability more evident.

Some might say, “I thought disabled students didn't want to be treated specially.” They are confusing the concept of equal treatment with equal opportunity.

In fact, if all else is equitable, why shouldn't equal treatment be sufficient? You give the same assignments, the same tests, and use the same grading system.

But all is not equitable! And because of that, equal treatment can result in a vast disadvantage to someone who is disabled.

Some years ago, a young student who was paralyzed from the waist down complained bitterly to me that he had to be carried up stairs by fellow students to attend one class.

Equal treatment was the last thing he wanted: “These twenty kids climb the stairs; I will too.”

What he wanted was equal opportunity—in this case, a ground floor classroom or an operational elevator.

In making seemingly special accommodations for students with disabilities—modified classrooms, adapted assignments, modified tests—instructors will actually make disabled students seem less extraordinary to other students.

Before going into the various modifications and adjustments an instructor might make to be more hospitable to disabled students, we should take a look at faculty attitudes. Research has repeatedly shown that a teacher's attitude toward a student greatly influences the nature of interaction between them. This, in turn, affects student achievement.⁵

Several myths contribute to low expectations of the disabled:

- The Myth of the Helpless Invalid

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inspires excessive cossetting and courtesy.

- The Myth of the Heroic places disabled individuals in the role of heroic overcomer, making it difficult for them to fit in.
- The Myth of the Invisible Untouchable denies the presence of someone with a disability.
- The Spread Phenomenon presumes that if there is one disability, surely there is another and another, so that intellectual, social, and other physical defects are expected.⁶

These myths can be easily dispelled. Donaldson found that negative attitudes of instructors toward individuals with disabilities can be made more positive simply by increasing interaction.⁷ University faculty training and development programs can and should address this issue.

Whether they do or not, any instructor can get to know individuals with disabilities, seek information about specific disabilities and learning difficulties, make use of available resources, and adapt materials and methodologies to disabled student needs.⁸

Keep in mind that even students within the same category of disability have different levels of functional skill. Compensation skills also vary widely from student to student. Consequently, though there are guidelines, each experi-

ence must be treated individually. The best experts to consult in providing an equal opportunity for particular disabled students are often the students themselves. Offering first, rather than providing first, is the approach to use.

You should also get to know and understand the services your institution has available to disabled students so that you can share this information with students who would benefit.

Here's a look at how to approach some specific disabilities.

Learning Disabled Students

Learning disabled students may have other difficulties, such as language or motor disorders. They may also have social or emotional problems, perceptual disorders, or memory problems.⁹

None of this means they are below average in intelligence. Nor are they unable to learn. Only the means by which they receive and process information is different.

Students with learning disabilities often do not request help. In their adolescence, they might have developed passive learning styles,¹⁰ making it that much more unlikely that they will initiate a request for help. As a result, they struggle through their courses unidentified and unassisted.

Their resulting abysmal perfor-

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mances seem, more or less, a statistical inevitability: "There are students who fail; it is expected that I shall get some of them."¹¹

Announcing as early in the semester as possible—preferably the first day of class—that those with special needs should identify themselves to you privately so that you can adjust lessons and assignments often preempts potentially damaging passivity.

Another possibility is making the syllabus available four to six weeks before the start of the quarter or semester, and if possible, making yourself available to discuss it as well.

Here are a few suggestions for making your classes more "user-friendly" for learning disabled students:

- Begin discussions and lectures with a brief review and introductory overview of topics to be covered.
- Make use of transparencies, overheads, or the chalkboard to reinforce oral instruction. Outlines and highlighting key words and concepts are especially helpful.
- Keep all visuals legible. Emphasize key concepts and main points orally.
- Give assignments orally and in writing and be available for questions.
- Allow for cooperative work, discussions, question periods, and

student participation.

- Provide study guides and review sessions for exams.¹²
- After class or during designated office hours, provide time to clarify assignments and concepts.
- For outside assignments, allow tape-recorded "papers" or oral presentations in lieu of written ones.
- Permit untimed tests and oral, tape-recorded, or typed exams.
- Develop alternative ways to demonstrate course mastery.
- Provide scratch and lined paper for students with poor handwriting.
- Offer alternatives to computer-scored answer sheets.

Some students with learning disabilities will show improved performance if timed tests are given in two parts. Others benefit if exam typefaces are enlarged.¹³

Tolerance for failure is low in students with learning disabilities. By planning a few successful experiences up front, you may encourage learning disabled students to persevere later.¹⁴

This is not to imply that you are expected to lower your standards. Learning disabled students, like all students, deserve the right to succeed or fail.¹⁵ We are simply encouraging you to be flexible in the method of evaluation and presentation of materials that you use.

If you suspect students have an

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unidentified learning disability, you might suggest they go to the appropriate campus office for assistance and referral. You should also be aware of some of the organizations that can provide support to adults with learning disabilities.¹⁶

Mobility Impaired Students

Mobility impaired students are concerned about access. In the words of a student forced to use a wheelchair: "Some barriers leave me outside crying 99 tears."

A barrier may be stairs, an inoperable elevator—or one with doors that close too quickly—a heavy door, a curb, narrow walkways or aisles, a vehicle blocking a path or a clutter of disorganized desks. Check with a mobility impaired student to get an accurate idea of specific abilities and challenges.

Accommodations might include arranging to move a class to another location, or the student to another section of the class held in a more suitable location.

Every effort should be made to integrate disabled students into the classroom setting. Assigning the disabled to a space by a doorway, at the rear of the classroom, or in a side aisle is undesirable.¹⁷

You might have to take a second look at some "immutable" standards. For instance, tardiness may be unavoidable for mobility im-

paired students. If the time between classes is short, they may have difficulty negotiating crowded paths, accessing elevators, and taking circuitous routes to class. Medical needs may also make absences unavoidable.

Discuss field trips or field work as far in advance as possible to allow adequate time for transportation or attendants to be arranged, or to create alternative assignments.

If physical impairments prevent the actual manipulations necessary for a lab class, students can still be taught equipment theory and methodology. The disabled student can give instructions to an aid who will perform the manipulations.

Test-taking alternatives might range from arranging for assistant writers from the campus special needs office to oral reply, tape-recorded answers, typed answers, or just plain extra time.

Most students with disabilities will have found note taking procedures that suit them. These might include assistant notetakers, laptop computers, photocopying other students notes, and tape recording.

Because some mobility impairments make library research difficult—out-of-reach bookshelves and card catalogues, difficult-to-use microfiche and copy equipment—extended time for such assignments is sometimes necessary.

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Visually Impaired Students

Both partially sighted and totally blind students benefit from instructor understanding. Visual impairment is not simply total blindness. Between 70 and 80 percent of all legally blind people in the United States have some sight. This is important for instructors to know because a student may be able to participate in an obviously sighted activity but still not participate in *all* sighted activity.

Syllabi and text lists should be provided to vision-impaired students before class begins to allow them some time to tape or braille the texts. Providing reading lists early allows students enough time to acquire large type books, books on tape, or books in braille. Texts on tape are usually available with several weeks advance notice.

You should allow students to use their own best note-taking system—a volunteer assistant, tape recorder, or, for the partially sighted, self-taken notes written largely with a felt tip marker. Partially sighted students often benefit from a seat near the front.

Be sensitive in your use of language. A comment like, “This plus this equals this,” is meaningless to someone who can’t see. Use charts, graphs, and visual aids as usual. But augment the visual aids with others that work by sound or touch.

For example, you might follow a statement such as, “This diagram shows the placement of the lungs,” with a description on how to locate them on one’s own body. A statement like, “Look at this chart,” might be followed by the comment, “This blue line extends up to the 5, while the red one stops at 3 . . .”

Handouts that duplicate board work are helpful. Repeat what you write on the board or show with a visual. Duplicate handouts with a large print copier whenever possible for partially sighted students.

For exams, provide large-type tests or give tests orally. The student may elect to have an assistant reader/writer. Another alternative is to provide the test on tape and allow a taped or written response or the use of braille. Allow additional time for test taking.

Be willing to extend deadlines or create alternate assignments. Plan field trips in advance and arrange with field supervisors for any necessary accommodations.

Hearing Impaired Students

It is also important to recognize that hearing impairment takes many different forms. About 15 million Americans have some hearing loss, according to the 1991-92 Census.

Not all hearing impaired students can lip read; not all like to

Wearing a hearing aid does not correct a hearing loss, but merely amplifies sound.

use sign language; not all have difficulty being understood; not all have the same communication skills. Someone proficient in lip reading will be able to recognize only 30 to 40 percent of the words in the English language. Wearing a hearing aid does not correct a hearing loss, but merely amplifies sound.

Here are some basic tips on talking to someone who is hearing impaired:

- Get the student's attention before talking.
- Face the hearing impaired student, not the interpreter, and speak clearly and slowly, while not exaggerating lip movements.
- Use short sentences.
- Use facial expressions and gestures.¹⁸
- Ask a student to repeat something you did not understand, and if that fails, ask him or her to write the comment down.
- Encourage hearing impaired students to sit in a front row seat—a hearing aid is ineffective if the speaker is more than a few feet from the receiver.
- Try to face the hearing impaired student.
- Avoid standing in front of windows or other back lights as the glare makes lip reading difficult.

Reviewing exams or homework orally can be difficult for a hearing impaired student. While you read the answer aloud, the student may

be checking his or her paper, and miss some of the information.

Showing answers using an overhead projector is one alternative. Verbal assignments should also be written on the board or in handouts.

Understand that if hearing impaired students seem to be talking out of turn, they may be trying to clarify some instruction with a fellow student.¹⁹ Since it is impossible to lip read and take notes simultaneously, good assistant notetakers are essential.

Classroom discussions are very hard for a hearing impaired student to follow. A horseshoe pattern of desks can be helpful. Asking students to raise their hands before speaking can also help to let the hearing impaired student know who will be speaking next. The hearing impaired will often not hear questions that are asked by other students. Repeating questions "from the audience" is helpful.

After a class discussion, you should summarize main points and repeat the most relevant comments. Provide vocabulary lists well in advance. Sometimes a hearing impaired student will have difficulty with new vocabulary. This does not reflect on their intelligence, but indicates they have never "heard" the word and may take more time to digest it. Offer independent viewing time for audio-visual materials as well.

Allow hearing impaired students to use reader/interpreters to rephrase questions during exams. Interpreters follow a code of ethics and will not reveal answers.²⁰ Oral tests are nearly impossible for the hearing impaired.

Our understanding of any disability situation will improve as we encourage students to share their insights into their own disabilities, and coping strategies with us. With that un-

derstanding, it will get easier to prepare for the situation.

Ultimately, our goal must be to deal with differences while always focusing on similarities. For legal, professional, and ethical reasons we should do all we can to provide equal opportunity. Like Alice, who so skillfully guided Harry through his day-to-day life, we must skillfully guide our students, disabled and nondisabled alike, through our courses. Planning and being prepared is where we begin. ■

Appendix

Tips for Teaching the Learning Disabled

- Make the syllabus available four to six weeks prior to the start of the quarter or semester, and, if possible, be accessible to discuss it before class starts up.
- Begin discussions and lectures with a brief review and then introductory overview of topics to be covered.
- Use transparencies, overheads, or the chalkboard to reinforce oral instruction, especially in the form of outlines. Highlight key words and concepts.
- Keep all visuals legible.
- Emphasize key concepts and main points in writing and orally.
- Give assignments orally and in writing and be available for further clarification.
- Provide opportunities for cooperative work.
- Provide time for individual clarification of assignments and concepts.
- Provide study guides and review

sessions for exams.

- Allow tape-recorded assignments and/or oral presentations in lieu of written ones.
- Modify evaluation procedures if necessary. Some suggestions might include permitting untimed tests; oral or tape-recorded or typed exams; alternatives to exams; provision of adequate scratch and lined paper for students with poor handwriting; offering alternatives to computer-scored answer sheets. Some students with learning disabilities will show improved performance if timed tests are given in two parts. Others benefit if exam typefaces are enlarged.

Tips for Teaching Those with Mobility Impairments

- Make sure the classroom is accessible, or arrange to move the class or discuss moving the student to another section.
- Allow for unavoidable tardiness.
- Understand and accommodate absence caused by required medical treatment.
- In seating the students, try to in-

- tegrate them into the classroom setting. Avoid placing them at the rear, near the door, or at a side aisle.
- Procure a table for a wheelchair-bound student if he or she prefers not to transfer to a desk.
 - Discuss field trips or field work as far in advance as possible to allow adequate time for transportation or attendants to be arranged, or to create alternative assignments.
 - If physical impairments prevent the actual manipulations necessary for a lab class, students can still be taught equipment theory and methodology. Participation can be attained by having the disabled student provide instruction to an aid who will perform the manipulations as instructed.
 - Mobility impaired students will suggest appropriate test-taking procedures. Possibilities include assistant writers, oral reply, tape recorded answers, typed answers, or extended-time exams in environments without distraction.
 - As with test taking, students will have adopted note taking procedures that suit them. Assistant notetakers, lap tops, photocopying other students' notes and tape recording have all been used.
 - Because some mobility impairments make library research difficult, extended time for library assignments is sometimes necessary.

Tips for Teaching the Visually Impaired

- Syllabi and text lists should be provided before class begins to allow time for students to tape or braille texts. Texts on tape are

usually available with several weeks advance notice.

- Provide reading lists at the beginning of the quarter or semester to allow students to acquire large type books or books on tape, or books in braille.
- A seat near the front will assist in seeing the board if possible and, if selected, taping notes. Handouts which duplicate board work are helpful.
- Repeat in spoken words everything you write on the board or show with a visual.
- Duplicate handouts with a large print copier whenever possible for partially sighted students.
- Be willing to extend deadlines or make alternative assignments.
- Plan field trips in advance and arrange with field supervisors for any adaptations necessary.
- Be sensitive to your use of language. A comment like, "This plus this equals this," is meaningless to someone who can't see.
- Use charts, graphs, and visual aids as usual, augmenting these with auditory and tactile illustrations. For example, follow "This diagram shows the placement of the lungs," with a description of how to locate them on one's own body. A remark like, "Look at this chart," might be followed by the comment, "This blue line extends up to the 5, while the blue one stops at 3 . . ."
- For exams, provide large type tests or give tests orally. The student may elect to have an assistant reader/writer. Another alternative is providing the test on tape and allowing a taped or written response or the use of braille. Allow additional time for test taking.

Tips for Teaching the Hearing Impaired

- Get a hearing impaired student's attention before talking.
- If a student uses an interpreter, speak to the student not the interpreter.
- Do not exaggerate lip movements. Speak clearly and perhaps, a little more slowly.
- Short sentences are easier to understand than long, clause-filled ones.
- Use facial expressions and gestures.
- Ask a student to repeat something you did not understand, and if that fails, ask him or her to write the comment down.
- Suggest a hearing impaired student sit in a front row seat. A hearing aid is ineffective if the speaker is more than a few feet from the receiver.
- Try to face front while addressing a class with a hearing impaired student.
- Avoid standing in front of back lights as glare makes lip reading difficult.
- Provide vocabulary lists well in advance.
- Classroom discussions are very hard for a hearing impaired student to follow. A horseshoe pattern of desks can be helpful, as is requiring a hand raise before speaking to alert the deaf student who will be speaking next. After a class discussion, you should summarize main points and repeat the most relevant comments.
- Student questions will most often be missed by the hearing impaired. Repeating questions "from the audience" is helpful.
- Offer independent viewing time

for audio-visual materials.

- Assignments and class dates should be recorded on the board or in handouts.
- In giving exams, allow hearing impaired students to use reader/interpreters to rephrase questions so that question intent is gleaned.
- Reviewing exams or homework orally can be difficult for a hearing impaired student. Showing answers using an overhead projector is one solution.

Endnotes

- ¹ *ADA Compliance Guide*, Thomas Publishing Group, 1995.
- ² Disabilities can be orthopedic, visual, speech, and hearing impairments. They can also derive from cerebral palsy, epilepsy, diabetes, muscular sclerosis, tuberculosis, cancer, and heart disease. Drug addiction and alcoholism are considered disabilities. Homosexuality and bisexuality are specifically excluded by ADA under the impairment definitions. See the *ADA Compliance Guide*, 1995.
- ³ Flick-Hruska, 1992
- ⁴ *ADA Compliance Guide*, 1995
- ⁵ Cazden, 1976; Macmillan, Jones, & Meyers, 1976; Schulz & Turnbull, 1984.
- ⁶ CUNY, 1988.
- ⁷ Donaldson, 1980.
- ⁸ Wood, 1993.
- ⁹ Mercer, 1992.
- ¹⁰ Lerner, 1988.
- ¹¹ Coles, 1987.
- ¹² Wood, 1993.
- ¹³ Wood, 1993; C.U.N.Y., 1988.
- ¹⁴ Wood, 1993.
- ¹⁵ CUNY, 1988.
- ¹⁶ Some of these organizations are: The Association for Learning-Disabled Children and Adults (ACLD), 4156 Library Road, Pittsburgh, PA 15234; Time Out to Enjoy, Inc., 7734 North Ashland Avenue, Chicago, IL 60626; the Association of Learning-Disabled

Adults, P.O. Box 9722, Friendship Station, Washington, D.C.; and Marin Puzzle People, 1368 Lincoln Avenue, Suite 105, San Rafael, CA 94701.

¹⁷ Flick-Hruska, 1992.

¹⁸ CUNY, 1988.

¹⁹ Wood, 1993.

²⁰ CUNY, 1988.

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