

## ***“Campus Partnerships: A Universal Approach to Advising Students with Disabilities”***

***Mary Lee Vance, Ph.D.***

Whether you are an academic advisor, student organization advisor, or someone else just wanting to be helpful – your campus Disability office and/or Americans with Disabilities (ADA) contact can help you learn how to more effectively advise students with disabilities, and insure reasonable (and legal) accommodations are provided to your students. Partner with these offices, as well as other campus offices, to learn your institution’s policies, in order to provide the best support for students with disabilities.

### **What is a reasonable accommodation?**

Reasonable accommodations are accommodations that do not create fundamental alterations of a program/policy/process, and/or create an undue financial or administrative burden to the institution. Each request for accommodations must be handled on a case-by-case basis by the institution’s authorized person/office.

### **What is the process for reasonable accommodations?**

On each campus there should be a primary person/office responsible for collecting and analyzing disability-related documentation from students seeking accommodations. Legal obligation begins once the student self-identifies to the responsible agent. To facilitate the process of self-identification, refer the student to the office/person responsible for collecting and reviewing documentation.

With regards to advisement, an example of a reasonable request may be if a student asks you to contact him/her by e-mail, and to conduct your advisement session asynchronously because s/he cannot meet with you during your set office hours. The request is even more reasonable if you offer this same option to all of your advisees, regardless of ability. As the advisor, you would then be universally applying a form of flexibility that all of your advisees could access, which would not require documentation and verification from a third party.

### **How do I advise a student with a disability?**

Your advisement expectations should be the same as with your other advisees however the manner/way in which you do it may differ. For example, there are a wide variety of reasons why students may not be comfortable and/or able to be advised in your office during set office hours. Some of the reasons may be connected to:

- Psychological or health disabilities – for example, students may be experiencing poor responses to new levels of medications, experiencing a severe (and embarrassing) case of irritable bowel syndrome, and/or other complication that makes coming to your office problematic.
- Physical - for example, if your office floor is littered with paper, with no clear path to your desk that is wide enough for a person in a wheelchair or a visually impaired person with a cane to navigate safely, this is not welcoming.

- Technological and/or learning style connected – for example, some students learn best with auditory instructions, and are accustomed to their text being read via their computer program, and/or prefer to give their computers verbal instructions rather than manually typing, and/or require other forms of specific computer access, in which case meeting in your office may not be productive if the meeting involves working on the computer to register for classes etc.
- Lifestyle and/or personal care – for example, some students may use a personal care attendant, need specialized transportation and/or depend on other accommodations that require them to schedule their lives around other peoples' timetables, therefore their ability to meet with you in person and in your office may be impractical.

### **Who benefits from flexibility?**

It is not just the disabled student who would benefit from an advisor being more flexible with advisement processes, but other students as well. The student with a child, the student with elderly parents, the student with an ill partner, the student with an impossible work schedule, the student about to be or currently deployed – all of them would benefit from advisor flexibility and creativity. These are the students most likely to be negatively affected because of their inability to meet restrictive expectations. So, rather than request an accommodation or a “favor” from you, they may instead choose to not “bother” you, and may very well become quietly lost in the system. Reasonable flexibility could lead to enhanced retention.

### **How can I help my students more effectively self-advocate?**

One of the primary reasons why educational accommodations are required in the first place is because often there is a lack of universality of inclusion in the teaching and assessment of the curriculum. As a concerned and conscientious advisor, you will want to work with your students to ensure that they have access to timely accommodations. You will want to discuss creative and reasonable ways they can get their accommodation needs met in the classroom and in the “real” world, while helping them develop appropriate course schedules, and realistic strategies for achieving their life goals.

A primary role of an effective advisor is to teach students whether disabled or not, to develop appropriate self-advocacy skills. A self-advocacy suggestion might be to encourage the disabled student to advocate for others, in addition to self. Because other students such as non-native English speakers and older non-traditional students could also benefit from note taking assistance, extended exam time accommodations, and other forms of flexibility, having a disabled student argue on behalf of all other class mates to have the same levels of curriculum flexibility s/he needs could be quite empowering.

### **What do I need to know about Universal Design?**

Since many academic advisors are also classroom instructors this section particularly pertains to the NACADA (National Academic Advising Association) concept that advisement is teaching. Advisors have the ability to be influential with students, faculty and administrators. Advisors have the potential to be instrumental in improving teaching and learning opportunities that benefit more than the disabled student populations. By

learning more about Universal Design, advisors will not only be better equipped to help empower disabled students, but may also empower themselves in the process.

The AHEAD brochure discussing Universal Design in Higher Education states that *“Universal Design is a conceptual framework for designing and developing inclusive environments. It stems from an attitude, not a prescriptive set of procedures. Its tenets challenge us to think beyond mere legal compliance by promoting new ways of viewing disability and access. Universal design reframes the concept of accessibility from ‘special features for a few’ to a good design throughout the lifespan.”*

As teachers outside the classroom, advisors can and should advocate on behalf of their advisees for the right to an inclusive learning environment. Advisors can, and should see themselves as positive change agents for their advisees, whether disabled or not. However, advisors should also remember that they are not alone in this mission, and should reach out to those on campus who share the same commitment to provide all students the opportunity to benefit from the shared learning environment.

#### **What other resources are suggested?**

- AHEAD [www.ahead.org](http://www.ahead.org) for information on the ADA, Section 504: The Law and Its” Impact on Postsecondary Education, UD Brochures (for students, inclusive lectures and presentations, and higher education), as well as other materials
- Do-It for UD in higher education teaching, application, checklists and other examples <http://www.washington.edu/doi/Resources/udesign.html>
- NACADA [www.nacada.ksu.edu](http://www.nacada.ksu.edu) for 2009 Monograph Advising Students with Disabilities and other valuable links
- The Center for Universal Design principles [http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/about\\_ud/about\\_ud.htm](http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/about_ud/about_ud.htm)
- Pamphlet "[Students with Disabilities: Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities](#)" the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in the U.S. Department of Education provides the information to explain the rights and responsibilities of students with disabilities who are preparing to attend postsecondary schools. This pamphlet also explains the obligations of a postsecondary school to provide academic adjustments, including auxiliary aids and services, to ensure that the school does not discriminate on the basis of disability <http://www.ed.gov/ocr/transition.html>]
- Pamphlet "[Auxiliary Aids and Services for Postsecondary Students with Disabilities Higher Education's Obligations Under Section 504 and Title II of the ADA](#)" located at: <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/auxaids.html>