

Accommodating Students with Disabilities at UAB

Advice for Faculty from Faculty

Christopher Robinson, Ph.D., Psychology

Maybe one of the biggest misinterpretations about DSS is that students can come in and feign a disability (e.g., ADD) and get extra time or accommodations. The truth is that students have to provide ample documentation for their disability before they are given DSS accommodations.

In my experience working with DSS, their motto seems to be that students with disabilities should only receive the accommodations they need to level the playing field, but that they should not try to take advantage of their disability. That is, DSS has stood behind me when a student has tried to use their disability in an attempt to become a class disruption, to request greater accommodations, or to get out of required assignments. When I am having a difficulty with a student, I don't hesitate to call DSS.

As for me, I always just sign off on DSS forms because I know that the students have been checked and whatever accommodations they are allowed are just those accommodations that they need. The majority of accommodations are very easy to meet, from allowing a recorder, a note taker, or extra time on an exam. I have also had some interesting experiences, from having to wear a microphone that was wired directly to a student's hearing aid, to having a woman convert all my lectures into sign language.

Laura Stansell, Math Department

What I have learned about accommodating a DSS student?

- Most DSS students are appreciative of their instructors for working with them.
- Most DSS students are a pleasure to have in my classroom, and I am always happy to see them succeed.
- Most DSS students want to share details about their disability, but I always advise them that I only need to know about their accommodations. I am happy to listen and talk with a DSS student, but I need for them to know that I will provide the accommodations without needing any private medical or personal information.
- It is important to have the same high expectations for all of your students, and this includes DSS students. I do not extend deadlines or lower the standards when assigning grades for a DSS student.

- DSS students are like any other students. Some are great students and some are not. Some are always on time for class and some are not. Some make A's and some make F's. This has nothing to do with their status as a DSS student but with their individual work ethic and personalities.
- It is best to document a conversation with a DSS student with a follow-up email to that student outlining the details of that conversation.

What I wish I had known early on?

- DSS is a great resource for any questions about a DSS student in your class. Don't try and figure things out on your own, it is quick and easy to give them a call if you are ever in doubt about how to best meet your student's needs.
- I had a particularly difficult student and situation one semester – probably the most difficult student I have ever had. Luckily, by the time this student had enrolled in my class, I had developed an understanding of the Disability Support Office and its role in my interaction with DSS students. I realized early on that this was an unusual and trying situation, so I contacted the DSS Office at the beginning of the semester for advice. The support, advice, and encouragement they gave me throughout the semester were instrumental in getting through the semester. The DSS Office also worked with this student in helping the student better understand the accommodations.

Advice to pass along to Colleagues

- When meeting with DSS students about their accommodations, I always let the student know that if at any time during the semester, they feel that their accommodations are not being met that they should let me know immediately. We can discuss the problem and get some help from the DSS office if necessary.
- Document your conversations with students.
- Never provide accommodations that are not listed on the DSS form and never provide accommodations until you have that form (unless the DSS Office tells you it is OK to do this). I have had students request accommodations not listed on their form. I always advise the student to contact DSS if they feel that they should have further accommodations.
- I always speak privately with DSS students when discussing their accommodations. I have had students in the past who continually want to discuss their accommodations with other students present. Even if a student tells me, "it's OK, I don't care", I will not discuss accommodations in the presence of other students.
- **IF IN DOUBT, CONTACT THE DSS OFFICE ANY TIME!** They are there for the instructors as well as the students. The goal is to provide quality DSS

services. This can only be done with active involvement from the student, DSS, and faculty. I keep the DSS Office number posted at my desk for easy access.

Stephen Smith, School of Medicine

The most significant thing to me has been that I don't really need to have any idea of the disability involved. Medical Students (perhaps more so than others, but I'm not sure of that) carry a degree of shame with any Learning Disability. Their ability to obtain assistance without having to reveal the need for the assistance appears to be, for some, a greatly liberating factor. While some don't seem to be concerned and share freely about their disability, and I sometimes think this information is helpful to me, it's nice that the option for privacy is preserved by the DSS process. My only other suggestion is to refer to DSS early, and if the student does not follow through, refer often.

Walter Johnson, Math Department**One Important Lesson We Have Learned**

- Probably the most important lesson we have learned here in the Math Dept after years of working with DSS students of many stripes is that we should involve DSS even when non-DSS issues arise with the student.
- There are many types of issues that instructors and departments have to deal with on an on-going basis; such as cheating, various types of misrepresentation, multiple absences or late-work excuses from a student, hostility in the classroom or hostility that arises in instructor meetings with a student, even hostility between students.
- Departments usually have an established culture as to how they respond to these and other student problems. What we have learned in the Math Dept is that in the case of a DSS student it is not a good idea for us to proceed independently to resolve the issue.
- Most often the DSS Office has amplifying information concerning the student's life here at UAB that serves to inform the problem resolution process and helps to bring it to a successful resolution. Their intimate knowledge of DSS law and UAB DSS policies turns out to be crucial in many cases.
- DSS staff can often resolve an issue more quickly and with less stress on the department and the student. Their intervention usually results in a more sound and more effective solution for all concerned.