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# Accomodating Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

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# Accommodating Students With Disabilities in Higher Education

Students who choose to attend Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities often do so because they want to experience the unique Christian worldview that permeates the curriculum. Many want more than a school where religious classes are taught—they expect the *entire* curriculum to be infused with Seventh-day Adventist values. Students with disabilities who enroll in Adventist colleges and universities desire these same college experiences. Recent figures (2012) released by the United States government show that almost 11 percent of undergraduates across the nation (almost two million students) have one or more disabilities. Approximately 15 percent of these have mobility impairments, six percent have hearing impairments, and three percent are blind or visually impaired. The largest group of students

with disabilities is those with “hidden” disabilities such as language-processing disorders (often referred to as dyslexia), Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), mental illness, and autism.<sup>1</sup> Disability service offices may only be aware of a fraction of these students, as many do not choose to identify themselves in college.

## The Role of Disabilities Service Offices

Most institutions of higher learning have a designated office where students can request accommodations (academic adjustments) for their classes. In smaller schools, this office may be associated with another office, such as Student Services or counseling. Students who require accommodations will need to meet with the appointed disability services staff, who will interview the student, examine the student’s documentation of the disability, and work with the student

to develop a list of accommodations that are appropriate for any limitations caused by his or her disabilities.<sup>2</sup>

The documentation required may vary from institution to institution, but usually includes a written assessment, prepared by a licensed special-education professional, that outlines the specific limitations caused by the student’s disability. When the applicant does not have documentation (which is often the case for students from smaller schools), the disability office will do the assessments if appropriate, or refer the student to a professional for the required assessment and documents. In cases where the disability is obvious (such as a person who uses a wheelchair), documentation may not be required. In more remote locations where certain assessments are not generally available, the disability staff may need to rely on student interviews, fac-

BY CARLETTA WITZEL, LUANA GREULICH, and JAMES R. JEFFERY

ulty observations, on-site testing, and a certain amount of trial and error.

### Notifying Teaching Faculty About a Student's Disability

Once the documentation has been evaluated and the disability officer has determined appropriate actions, the professors will be notified about the required accommodations, which may include “modifications or adjustments to the delivery of instruction or other academic features of a course to ensure equal access by a student with a disability, while not fundamentally altering the academic program itself.”<sup>3</sup> Common accommodations include extra time to take tests, quiet testing locations, assigned note-takers or recorded lectures, electronic textbooks to be read using a text-to-speech computer program, designated interpreters for the deaf and hard of hearing, enlarged text, having class locations changed to more accessible places, plus accessible housing, parking, and food accommodations.

Often the student will carry a letter or form to each faculty member and discuss the best ways to facilitate the accommodations. For privacy reasons, the specific information in the documentation is usually not given to faculty by the disability office, although some students will freely share information about themselves.<sup>4</sup> Instructors may contact the disability office to suggest alternate, and sometimes more effective, ways to provide the accommodation. For example, when a note-taker is required, the professors may offer to provide copies of their own notes or slides to the student.

Faculty members should assume that a student with a disability is as capable as any other student. The presence of a disability does not make a student more or less intelligent, motivated, responsible, or talented than others. However, students with a disability may need an alternate way to learn or show their understanding of the class content (accommodation).<sup>5</sup>

### Recommendations for Starting a New Disability Office

- *Learn about disability services.* The Association on Higher Education and Disability (<http://www.AHEAD.org>) is a great resource for U.S. and overseas providers. The “Learn” section has links to many resources available even to non-members. See also <http://www.disabilitycomplianceforhighereducation.com>, which has a large number of articles about disability issues. Visitors to the site can browse articles before deciding to join the organization.
- *Network with other people working in this area.* The AHEAD Website has links for regional organizations where you can get acquainted with other college disability personnel. Most will be extremely helpful, and some will share their forms and documents to use as models for your own.
- *Get your administrators and faculty on board.* Help everyone to understand the school's responsibility to provide accommodations and your role in helping the school to fulfill this commitment.
- *Write disability policies for your institution.* It helps to look at other institutions' policies before you try to write your own. Ask your school's legal counsel to review your policies to be sure they align with the laws of your country and state/province.
- *Develop necessary procedures,* such as interviewing students, collecting documentation, and notifying teachers.
- *Keep good records.* Save student information and communications, a record of decisions and policies, and any adaptations that were necessary after implementation.

### Helping Students With Disabilities Succeed

There are several actions that faculty can take to facilitate better success for all of their students—students with disabilities as well as non-disabled students who may be studying in a second language or may lack sufficient background knowledge of the subject. These suggestions are for postsecondary instructors, but many are also appropriate for elementary and secondary teachers.

- *Select textbooks early and send your textbook information to the bookstore.* Students who need electronic texts because of visual impairments or reading disabilities need to be able to purchase their texts early so the disabilities office has time to obtain the electronic copies from the publishers. When textbook orders are submitted late, the students may not be able to have accessible texts when classes begin.
- *Put a statement in your syllabus describing how a student with a disability can request accommodations.* Statements may vary but should contain information about how to obtain accommodations at your school, the

commitment of the faculty to accommodate students, and contact information for the correct office. Colleges often provide a uniform statement for all syllabi. This statement may need further adaptation in classes that present special challenges to students with disabilities, such as labs and practicum.

- *Prepare any handouts and online materials in an accessible format.* Most Word documents are accessible because they can be copied and pasted or modified by making enlargements or applying different fonts. Photocopies and PDFs are not accessible because they are pictures of documents and cannot easily be modified. Your copier or scanner may have an optical character recognition (OCR) program that can be used to create an accessible format for your copied material. Your disability office, or perhaps your campus press, may also be able to help. Regular handouts may still be used in class, with the accessible electronic version available so that a student who needs to

read the document electronically will be able to receive the materials at the same time as the rest of the class.

- *Plan and implement several opportunities for students to demonstrate learning.* Giving several tests rather than only midterm and final exams allows students to learn from the testing experience and tends to reduce anxiety. Projects, labs, and presentations give additional opportunities for students to earn points and are helpful to those who do not show their best understanding through written tests.<sup>6</sup>

- *If you plan to use videos, try to purchase versions that are captioned.* Closed captions are essential for students who do not hear well and helpful for ESL students. Existing materials can be captioned, but it is much easier and more cost effective to request captioned materials when you purchase the video.<sup>7</sup>

- *If you use an online class-management system such as Blackboard or Moodle, check to make sure all components of the class are accessible.* Documents should be posted in an accessible format. Recorded lectures should be captioned, or a transcript should be provided. Pictures should have written descriptions. Timed activities need to be modified for those students who require extended time. Online discussions can be difficult for students with language difficulties, slower processing, or ADHD. Consider an alternate way for such students to demonstrate their learning processes and conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

- *Present class content in small, well-*

*organized segments.* Allow brief pauses for students to keep up with note-taking. Check with the students periodically to make sure they understand. Some instructors use an electronic clicker system where students can quickly respond to a question. Others may present a problem that requires the students to use the information that has just been presented.

- *Provide clear guidelines (both verbally and in writing) so students understand what is expected in completed work.* Giving instructions as lists is helpful for many students. Rubrics and samples of excellent completed work help students to understand what is expected.

All of these strategies will be beneficial to students with or without a disability. However, college professors should be cautious about providing special arrangements to students with disabilities that are not provided to other students unless they have a request from the institution's disability office. This policy helps to provide a unified plan for the student and protects his or her privacy. It also helps to protect faculty members from charges of discrimination if one instructor should give fewer accommodations than another.<sup>9</sup> The best practice is to deliver instruction in a way that benefits all students, be ready to make accommodations, and refer all students who request special accommodations to the disability office.

Faculty and staff at Christian institutions have a special mission to present

Jesus to all of their students. Yet, this more is required: "But it is not enough that the teacher possess natural ability and intellectual culture. These are indispensable, but without a spiritual fitness for the work he is not prepared to engage in it. He should see in every pupil the handiwork of God—a candidate for immortal honors. He should seek to educate, train, and discipline the youth that each may reach the high standard of excellence to which God calls him."<sup>10</sup> Creating environments that transform the college experience for all students, including those who need alternate ways to participate in the college experience, is a privilege and a responsibility. Making accommodations and simple academic adjustments demonstrate a Christlike attitude, not just to students who have disabilities, but to all students who witness these caring actions. ✍

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*This article has been peer reviewed.*

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Michigan. As a member of the Student Success Office team, she coordinates accommodations for students with disabilities and helps any student who is experi-

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encing academic difficulties. Her areas of research interest include disability law and academic support.



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**James Jeffery, Ph.D.**, served as the Dean of the School of Education at Andrews University from 2003–2015 and recently retired. His background in education includes being a high school principal, a school superintendent, department chair, and professor of leadership and educational administration. Dr. Jeffery's research interests are in school governance and leadership, and online teaching and learning.

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Guest Editorial Continued from page 3

mon Core State Standards. As guest editor for this issue, I would like to call for more topics in special education in publications like THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION.

Our goal for this issue is to help teachers learn about resources they can successfully use in their classrooms to assist students with disabilities. Our teachers need more resources to help them ensure that every student enrolled in our schools not only obtains a good spiritual foundation, but also a strong academic foundation. May the words of Jesus in Luke 9:48 resonate as we strive to meet this need: "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great" (ESV).<sup>6</sup>

**Luana Greulich, Ph.D.**, serves as Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Special Education Program at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Dr. Greulich earned her doctorate in special education from Florida State University in Tallahassee. While at FSU, she worked at the Florida Center for Reading Research. Her teaching experiences include being an elementary teacher, special-education teacher, and university professor. Her passion is teaching and research, and she has authored and presented papers on reading, behavior, *Response to Intervention*, and writing. She is currently a member of the Michigan Educator Preparation Institute and the Michigan Autism Council. In the past three years, she has enhanced the Special Education Program at Andrews University and is currently pursuing avenues to do

research in the surrounding public school systems. The JAE editorial staff express heartfelt appreciation for the many hours Dr. Greulich devoted to selecting topics, obtaining peer reviewers, providing input on article content, as well as her prompt responses to the editor's questions during the planning and production of this issue.

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