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Determining Reasonable Accommodations for the Learning Impaired: New Issues for Able-Bodied Communication Administrators

CRAIG NEWBURGER

ROUGHLY one in eleven full-time freshmen (8.8%) enrolled in college in 1991 reported having a disability (*Information from HEATH, 1992, p. 1*). The number of full-time freshman reporting having a disability has risen substantially since 1978 when "the proportion was about one in thirty-eight freshmen, or 2.6%" (*Information from HEATH, 1992, p. 1*). Higher education has been guided by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 in making learning accessible to disabled individuals. Section 504 states:

No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States...shall, solely by reason of her/his handicap, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal assistance.

The Higher Education Act (HEA) P. L. 102-325 (as reauthorized on July 23, 1992) replaces the term *physically handicapped* with "individuals with disabilities" as defined under section 3 of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (*Information from HEATH, 1992*). This change results in the need for communication educators to provide reasonable accommodations for ensuring that our discipline's learning opportunities are accessible to individuals with learning disabilities, mental disabilities, psychiatric disorders, drug or alcohol addiction, as well as those with physical disabilities.

Surely, many communication educators already indicate in their course syllabi that accommodations will be made to serve the learning needs of students with disabilities. The increasing number of disabled students and the wide variety of learning impairments that require reasonable accommodations, however, present communication educators with new challenges concerning faculty education, departmental policy formulation and corresponding implementation.

The first issue confronting communication educators involves the nature of our interactions with our disabled students. Such students may be reluctant to disclose their personal circumstances to their instructors, even when a campus student counseling services office arms them with explanatory documents intended to affirm their sincerity and disarm the potential for them to feel embarrassed. Some learning impaired students have been "isolated, misunderstood, and stigmatized, thus, the simplest act of communicating may become fraught with anxiety" (Booth-Butterfield, Heare & Booth-Butterfield, 1991, p. 241). Students with disabilities who confront able-bodied instructors with information detailing their disabilities may experience "anxious arousal associated with...making oneself known to others...thus, putting oneself at risk of eliciting negative...evaluations" (p. 242). Communication educators may need to explore potential anxiety reduction interventions (beyond statements in course syllabi) in order to fulfill our obligation to ensure that our learning environments will be accessible to learning impaired students.

The second issue confronting communication educators involves how sensitive we are to the broad nature of what constitutes a disability that warrants a reasonable accommodation. How would we react to a student who confides at the first class meeting of a two hour and forty-five minute evening class that she/he falls asleep for ten minutes every night at eight o'clock? "What am I supposed to do, talk softer? Am I being scammed, or what?" might represent some instructors' unspoken reactions. Students suffering from narcolepsy (the tendency to fall asleep when one is still for several moments), however, may take medication and/or may be on a programmed sleeping regimen—where every night at eight o'clock the student sleeps for ten minutes. Surely, an arrangement can be made to excuse the student from class to go to her/his car for fifteen minutes if the situation is properly considered. Additionally, students susceptible to post-traumatic stress or depression may experience occasional irregularities while taking or coming off a prescription of antidepressants. Should such students' instructors be more flexible with assignment deadlines (that can certainly incite stress for able-bodied students) for them upon request? What are the ground rules? What constitutes a reasonable accommodation?

Many universities require verifiable and recent documentation of a student's disability (frequently handled by a student counseling services or appropriate dean's office) before action can be taken on providing an accommodation. The guidelines for submission of such documentation are often spelled out in university registration information packages and catalogues. These campuses refrain from asking instructors to make retroactive adjustments after documentation is received.

Once a campus is properly informed its student counseling services may arm disabled students with disclosure information to present to their instructors and may even correspond with the instructors directly. At this point individual instructors and/or their departments must consider what reasonable accommodations can be made to provide accessible learning environments. The challenge for communication administrators to proactively address the legal, moral and ethical issues concerned with ensuring that such environments will be provided, while correspondingly maintaining that the academic integrity of their speech communication programs will not be subverted, can be intense.

Speech communication departments that offer courses using computer-assisted instruction (CAI) will certainly have to provide accommodations for sight impaired students. Additionally, making allowances for classes to be tape-recorded, interpreters or note takers, the scheduling

of special out-of-class examinations (where the exams may be read orally, etc.), additional time for completion of examinations, changing test formats (e.g., from multiple choice to essay), etc. represent some of the accommodations that are easy to provide. Other pedagogical choices may not be as clear cut. "Recent findings show, for example, that students with learning disabilities have basic native language difficulties (written and/or oral, receptive and/or expressive)" (*Information from HEATH, 1992, p. 8*). [e.g., Students with a language processing disability may experience inordinate difficulty in perceiving the double meanings of words.] In some cases speech communication departments will have to consider the viability of making course substitutions (e.g., professional writing in place of public speaking) or waiving certain course or degree requirements. In other cases alternative ways for students to demonstrate course mastery (e.g., audio tape vs. typed or written paper) will have to be considered.

The following faculty rights and responsibilities were proposed to guide academic departments in their deliberations concerning what constitutes "reasonable accommodations" (Christopher Newport University, 1994):

RIGHTS

University faculty have the right to identify the abilities, skills, and knowledge necessary for success in their academic programs. University faculty have the right to evaluate student performances against standards that are fundamental to their academic programs. University faculty have the right to refuse an accommodation that would fundamentally alter the quality of a student's academic program.

RESPONSIBILITIES

University faculty have the responsibility to maintain academic standards that are fundamental to providing quality programs while ensuring the rights of individuals with disabilities.

University faculty have the responsibility to evaluate students' performances in ways that accurately reflect their abilities, not the impact of a disability. In cases where an instructional accommodation cannot be devised without compromising the academic integrity of a program the student affected should be counseled towards choosing another course of study.

University faculty have the responsibility to adjust, substitute, or waive any academic requirements that unfairly discriminate against students with disabilities if they are not essential to the integrity of the students' academic programs.

All academic disciplines must adapt to the increasing number of disabled students entering their classrooms. The identification and promotion of effective interaction strategies between able-bodied administrators and faculty and their disabled students; and the determination and implementation of policies and case-by-case decisions concerning the provision of reasonable accommodations for learning impaired students, provides communication educators with unique pedagogical research and grant acquisition opportunities. The identification and elaboration of new issues and related lines of inquiry will have cross-discipline applications.

The Higher Education Act (HEA) "creates a program to award grants to colleges to develop model faculty-development programs that will educate high school teachers and college faculty members about how to teach students with disabilities...Several of the grants will be for making the curriculum accessible to students with disabilities and lowering the teaching assignments of some faculty to educate them on the needs of students with

disabilities" (*Information from HEATH*, 1992, p. 10). The need for communication educators to lend a helping hand in developing faculty education programs, faculty decision-making guidelines, and classroom practices for the national academic forum (across disciplines) is apparent.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

Craig Newburger (Ph.D., Purdue University, 1983) is Associate Professor, Department of Arts and Communication, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, VA 23606-2998.

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