Many students on postsecondary campuses have disabilities that are not easily noticed. This situation can lead to misunderstandings. As articulated by Beatrice Awoniyi, director and assistant dean for the Student Disability Resource Center at Florida State University, "You may look at a student and you say, you know, you look like every other student in the class, what do you mean you need note-taking? What do you mean you need extra time on the test? It might not be apparent to you as a faculty member that a student has a disability, but that disability may impact their participation in the class."

Sometimes, students with invisible disabilities are perceived as lacking in intelligence, or as not paying attention. That happened to Nate before he was diagnosed with a learning disability: "They'd look at me and they'd be like, oh, well, you're faking, you're playing around, you're just not trying hard enough or something. But I was trying." Another student, Jesse, states, "My father has learning disabilities and actually his mom does too, so there's a history there and my parents kind of wondered if something was going on. But the school kept saying, 'He's just a little slow, he'll pick it up.' So by the end of second grade I still couldn't read at all."

Types of Disabilities

Invisible disabilities include:
- Asperger's syndrome;
- attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders, or ADHD;
- brain injury;
- learning disabilities;
- psychiatric conditions;
- seizure disorders; and
- Tourette's syndrome;

The number of college students with these types of disabilities continues to grow. As predicted by Al Souma, a Disability Support Services counselor at Seattle Central Community College, "There's a very good chance that we'll be seeing a lot of these students in our classrooms over the years. Now, with the new wave of psychiatric medications that are out there, students are finding that they are able to concentrate better and participate in classroom activities more than ever before."

Invisible disabilities may affect the way a student processes, retains, and communicates information. A student may not be able to screen out distractions, making it hard to focus; may not have the stamina for a full class load; or may not be able to interact well with others. Anxiety may make it difficult to take tests or to approach professors with questions. All people experience their disabilities uniquely. Students who have the same medical diagnosis for their condition may have different abilities and disabilities and different accommodation needs. It is important to work with each individual to figure out what's best in a specific situation.

Professors may have safety concerns about students with particular disabilities, such as seizure disorders. It might feel to them like too much responsibility. However, as reported by Sharon Bittner, director of Academic Support Services at Des Moines Area Community College, "Students with seizure disorders often control their seizures well with medication, so [professors are] really not going to see frequent seizures in the classroom. It is important, however, for an instructor to know what to do in the event of a seizure. And if the student discloses and says, 'I have a seizure disorder,' then it's very easy for the disability services officer to talk with him and say, 'What would you like for your instructor to know?'"

There might also be concerns about psychiatric conditions. What if a student has an outburst? What if his behavior disrupts the class? Audrey Smelser, counselor and disability specialist at National Park Community College, says that on her campus, "We would encourage faculty to refer

those students who have some outburst in class to the counseling center for us to work with them on stress management and appropriate behaviors, just as we would any other student."

Familiarity with conditions such as Asperger's or Tourette's syndrome can help faculty feel more comfortable with a student's occasional lack of social skills. Linda Walter, director of Disability Support Services at Seton Hall University, explains, "Sometimes students with Asperger's don't have the filter to be able to stop asking questions if there are certain things that they want to know. So they may monopolize a lot of class time and one of the things that we really try to work on is a signal where the professor can let the student know that, 'You've asked enough questions, and I will help you, but it's just not going to be now.'"

Accommodations

Students with invisible disabilities may or may not need accommodations in a college classroom. If they do, it's the students' responsibility to self-disclose, provide documentation of the disabilities, and request accommodations. However, they may choose not to let anyone know about the disability and just try to "make it on their own." This approach can be stressful for both the student and the professor. Suzanne Tucker, a Disability Resource Office coordinator at Southern Connecticut State University, adds, "There are times [when] faculty are frustrated with students because they self-disclose later in the semester. They don't [disclose] at the initial start of a semester. And [faculty] often will come to the disabled student service person and say, 'Why didn't this student disclose? Why did they wait 'til they did badly on that first exam?' And I think, you know, there's not one answer."

College students with disabilities should contact the disabled student services office on campus before they start classes. Staff there will typically check documentation of the disabilities, determine appropriate accommodations, and give the students letters authorizing those accommodations. Beatrice Awoniyi explains, "What we look into is, how does that disability affect that specific

person for that specific class? And then we make a determination of what types of accommodation will be reasonable and what will be appropriate. Not all accommodations are reasonable and not all accommodations are appropriate."

An accommodation is not appropriate if it would
• make a substantial change in an essential element of the curriculum,
• alter course objectives,
• impose an undue financial or administrative burden to the institution, or
• pose a direct threat to the health or safety of others.

If an accommodation request seems unreasonable, a compromise could be discussed between the professor, the student, and the disabled student services staff. For example, as Rebecca Cory, manager of Disability Services at North Seattle Community College, reports, "[At Wells College] I was working with a student who had Tourette's syndrome, which is a disability that causes her to experience some physical and vocal tics. And this student was taking a chemistry class, and was working with a chemistry professor, and the professor was concerned that these physical tics may cause a hazard in the chemistry class, in the laboratory specifically. And so we worked with this professor and the student to get a lab situation that was not going to be a problem for the student. We replaced the glassware with plastic when we could, and with Pyrex when we could, and we paired the student with a lab partner, so that if there was a chemical that the student might have difficulty handling, in case she had a physical tic during the handling of it, the lab partner would handle those specific chemicals and the student was still working in a situation that was safe, and she could learn what she needed to learn."

Students with disabilities have the right to confidentiality. If a student appears to be struggling in class, but hasn't requested accommodations, the professor is not advised to ask if a disability is involved. But there are acceptable ways to offer assistance. You could suggest resources on campus, such as tutoring or instructional centers, and

include disabled student services as one of those resources. A proactive approach is to include a statement on your class syllabus, inviting students to talk with you about any disability-related concerns. For example, you could say: "If you wish to discuss academic accommodations, please contact me as soon as possible." This will make students with disabilities more comfortable discussing accommodations.

A student may request accommodations for the classroom, assignments, and exams. Some commonly-requested classroom accommodations include
*   seating near the door to allow taking breaks;
*   alternative note taking: tape recorder, note taker, or a copy of instructor's notes; and
*   early availability of syllabus and textbooks.

Assignment accommodations include
*   advance notice,
*   additional time for completion,
*   feedback and assistance in planning workflow,
*   choice of written or oral presentation, and
*   assistance during hospitalization.

Accommodations for exams include
*   alternate format: multiple choice, essay, oral, presentation, role-play, or portfolio;
*   use of adaptive computer software such as speech recognition;
*   extended time for test-taking;
*   taking tests in a separate, non-distracting room; and
*   a scribe, reader, or word processor for exams.

In some cases, accommodations may extend beyond the classroom. For example, a medical student might eventually need to do clinical work. An individual discussion of options may be necessary.

Universal Design of Instruction

Good teaching can minimize the need for accommodations. By using principles of universal design in your instruction, you'll maximize learning for all students in your class. Universal design means that you take steps to effectively teach to a diverse audience. Expect that characteristics of students in a class will come from a wide range of ethnic and racial backgrounds, represent more than one gender, and include a wide range of disabilities, abilities, and learning styles. Universal design strategies are usually not difficult to employ. For instance, as you're designing your course you might think of alternative assignments for students—they might write a paper, they might give a presentation, or they might put together a portfolio to meet a requirement in class. These alternatives work well for students with a variety of learning styles and backgrounds, including those with disabilities.

Planning your curriculum with universal design in mind can reduce or eliminate the need for accommodations later, and that's helpful for both faculty and students. Meryl Berstein, director of the Center for Academic Support at Johnson & Wales University, reports, "If you're designing your class work so that it will be accessible to all students in class, it might take a little bit longer for you to do that initially. But the benefits of [preparing] to you, as well as to the student, will be reaped later. Because once you've done it, you've done it. You are not going to have to re-invent the wheel."

Other elements of universal design that may be particularly helpful to students with invisible disabilities include
*   multiple methods of delivery, including lectures, discussion, hands-on activities, Internet-based interaction, and fieldwork;
*   providing printed materials and electronic resources that summarize or outline lecture content;
*   encouraging a variety of ways for students to interact with each other and with you, such as in-class discussion, group work, one-on-one meetings, and email;

- providing feedback periodically as an assignment is being completed; and
- including questions on tests that require a variety of responses, such as multiple choice and essay.

As explained by Beatrice Awoniyi, "When we adopt the principles of universal design, we minimize the amount of accommodations that we're going to need, and students who are in the class who have disabilities may not even have to ask for accommodations. Of course, that doesn't mean that we're not going to have anyone requesting accommodations; we just limit the number of accommodations that we have to provide."

Additional Resources

For more specific information about working with students who have learning or psychiatric disabilities, consult the following publications at *www.uw.edu/doit/Brochures/Academics/*

- *Academic Accommodations for Students with Learning Disabilities*
- *Academic Accommodations for Students with Psychiatric Disabilities*

The following websites include more comprehensive information:
- LD OnLine
  www.ldonline.org
- National Institute of Mental Health
  www.nimh.nih.gov/

For more information on universal design in education, consult *The Center for Universal Design in Education* at *www.uw.edu/doit/CUDE/* or the resources available at *www.uw.edu/doit/Resources/udesign.html*; of particular relevance is the video and publication entitled *Equal Access: Universal Design of Instruction* at *www.uw.edu/doit/Video/index.php?vid=13.* Additional videos can be found at *www.uw.edu/doit/Video/*; of particular relevance are the videos entitled *Invisible Disabilities and Postsecondary Education* and *Working Together: People with Disabilities and Computer Technology*.

About DO-IT

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For further information, to be placed on the DO-IT mailing list, request materials in an alternate format, or to make comments or suggestions about DO-IT publications or web pages, contact:

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