

Disability & Accessibility in the Classroom

WHAT?

Disability: As defined by the Federal Disability Reference Guide (2022), disability is “a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person's body and mind and features of the society in which they live. A disability can occur at any time in a person's life; some people are born with a disability, while others develop a disability later in life. It can be permanent, temporary or episodic. Disability can steadily worsen, remain the same, or improve. It can be very mild to very severe. It can be the cause, as well as the result, of disease, illness, injury, or substance abuse” (p. 2).

Accessibility: The concept of accessibility speaks to whether or not a physical space, product, service, design, or content can be accessed and used by everyone. Further, accessibility addresses specific needs and removal of barriers for people with disabilities may have in order to gain equal access or equivalent experience.

Barrier: According to the Accessible Canada Act (2019), a barrier “means anything—including anything physical, architectural, technological or attitudinal, anything that is based on information or communications or anything that is the result of a policy or a practice—that hinders the full and equal participation in society of persons with an impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment or a functional limitation” (pg. 2)

Accommodation: Academic accommodations are individualized alterations in how a student accesses course or program content or information, participates in learning and course work, and/or demonstrates skills or knowledge. Accommodations allow students a fair opportunity to engage in academic activities and fulfill essential course and program requirements.

WHY?

JIBC has a legal duty to accommodate. Faculty and staff are an essential part of the academic accommodation process. Professors and instructors are expected to collaboratively with Disability Resources in order to implement a student's accommodation(s). Further, professors and instructors are required to participate in the accommodation process to the point of undue hardship.

“It is the responsibility of faculty members to be conversant with policies and resources related to teaching students with disabilities, to ensure specific rights and entitlements of students with disabilities are upheld in their class, and to create equitable environment in their courses where respect for dignity of persons with disabilities is upheld” (York University, n.d.).

Undue Hardship exists when the cost of providing the requested accommodation would be disproportionate and place an undue burden on the Institution. Cost may pertain to financial cost, significant alternation of the fundamental nature of the program or service, learning opportunities for other students, or risks to health and safety to other persons or property.

HOW?

A great way to ensure accessibility of your course content is to practice good Universal Design for Learning, or UDL. According to the BC Campus Accessibility Toolkit, “Universal Design is the process of creating products (devices, environments, systems, and processes) that are usable by people with the widest possible range of abilities, operating within the widest possible range of situations (environments, conditions, and circumstances)” (p. 7).

Ensure that, whenever possible, students have accessible course materials, whether it be readable PDF documents, open-source textbooks, copies of course materials and slides in advance, closed captions, and the ability to re-review testable course material (i.e., by facilitating lecture recording).

Consider how best to assess your students in a way that allows them to demonstrate their knowledge. The need for many common accommodations – such as extra time on tests, time extensions on assignments, alternative format materials, lecture notes in advance, and lecture recording, can be mediated or eliminated through accessible course design.

When interacting with students regarding their accommodations, be sure to keep confidentiality in mind. Accommodation-related conversations should happen in a private setting. It's a good idea to connect with the student to come up with a plan of how best to meet their accommodations in your classroom. Check in with the student throughout the term to ensure the plan is still working. Make sure not to disclose that a student has accommodations in front of the whole class without first discussing with the student if they are comfortable with others knowing. Remember that the student does not need to share their diagnosis/diagnoses with you as part of the accommodation process.

Use the resources available to you at JIBC if you are not sure how to best to implement a student's accommodations, or how to design your course to be accessible. The Centre for Teaching, Learning and Innovation can help you incorporate UDL into your course design. The Senior Manager, Student Learning Supports & Disability Resources can help you navigate the accommodation process and offer additional resources as needed.

Find more information here: <https://www.jibc.ca/teaching-learning/equity-diversity-inclusion-edi>

<https://www.jibc.ca/policy/student-code-conduct>

References:

- York University. (n.d.). *Information for Faculty | Student Accessibility Services*. <https://accessibility.students.yorku.ca/information-for-faculty>
- Accessible Canada Act. (2019). In *Justice Laws Website*. Justice Canada. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/A-0.6.pdf>
- Federal Disability Reference Guide. (n.d.). In *Human Resources and Skills Development Canada*. Government of Canada. <http://www12.hrsdc.gc.ca/>
- Coolidge, A., Doner, S., Robertson, T., & Gray, J. (2018). *Accessibility Toolkit* (2nd ed.). BC Campus. <https://opentextbc.ca/accessibilitytoolkit/>