# Fostering an Inclusive Classroom:

# A Guide to Student Disabilities and Accommodations at the University of Virginia

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This guide has been created for the use of new Teaching Assistants and Professors who may be unaware of disability needs on campus. Created by a disabled student, utilizing data from the Student Disability Access Center (SDAC), and incorporating the voice of other TAs, this guide will introduce you to accommodations and student needs here at UVA. It is my greatest hope, and the hope of all coordinators, that this guide will aid you in creating an inclusive learning environment for your students.

I have organized this guide because of my own issues securing accommodations for a physical disability as an undergraduate and now as a graduate student. It is difficult to ask for accommodations as a student. Our system (graduate and undergraduate) prioritizes fast learning, concrete deadlines, and critical thinking through timed verbal and written communication. As educators we must be aware that we are contributing to this ableist system. Students searching for accommodations are not well versed in the politics of disability. They may not know what is available to them, or understand their legal rights as students of a public university. They will be struggling to find answers, to come to terms with their disabilities, and to negotiate how this new status will influence their futures. Students with mental health problems might feel that their impairment "doesn't really count" or that there's nothing that can be offered to them. It's up to you as an educator to understand that disabilities vary widely and can be widely accommodated here at UVA.

## What are accommodations?

The passage of the ADA in 1990 proclaimed it the legal right of all disabled individuals to secure accommodations. Accommodations are "modifications or adjustments to the tasks, environment or to the way things are usually done that enable individuals with disabilities to have an equal opportunity to participate in an academic program or a job" (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).  The most important aspect of accommodations is that they are an equitable way of incorporating diversity in our classrooms. Accommodations enable students with disabilities to perform the essential functions of the academic program, and enable students with disabilities to enjoy equal benefits and privileges. For more on the nature of accommodations, visit the American Psychological Associations information on reasonable accommodations explained.

At the University of Virginia, students are individually assessed to determine appropriate and reasonable accommodations. For a list of accommodations offered at UVA, please see page 5.

## Why are accommodations necessary?

Numerous misconceptions surround the nature of accommodations that run parallel to able-bodied concerns about the nature of productivity. We can clearly see this through the university system as concrete deadlines, lengthy reading assignments, and quick communication skills are continuously prioritized over other signs of comprehension. This focus of productivity, output, and involvement is something that has been created over time and space. It is our job as educators to question the validity of these priorities and to engage in a broader discussion on the purpose of a college education. Acknowledging the historic oppression of disabled individuals, as well as the hardships inherent in the university system, allows us to combat these barriers.

As we acknowledge the issues inherent in our modern system, we must also understand broad historical overviews of disability. Multiple models of disability have existed throughout history to explain human variance. There are two major models: *medical* and *social*, that have defined disability politics in the United States.

The *medical model* locates disability in the individual body, as a diagnostic separate from the social life of the individual. Limitations faced by disabled individuals in this model result from the bodily impairment itself.

The *social model* recognizes the relationship between a disabled individual and their environment - incorporating social, political, legal, and environmental factors as the basis for exclusion. This exclusion from able-bodied society is created and defended by mainstream expectations, which we term *barriers.* These barriers prevent disabled individuals from fully participating within their society.

Our society upholds able-bodiedness, and disability is a stigma created to disenfranchise, dismiss, and oppress those with what mainstream society calls deviant bodies. Disability is not innate therefore, but has been constructed by our social, legal, medical, political, and cultural system. By implementing accommodations, we are able to acknowledge that barriers have been created that prohibit the advancement of disabled individuals. These barriers can be overcome when we allow for individual accommodations and structure accessible classrooms. For more information, please refer to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy for the various models of disability (social, medical, minority group model, human variation model).

## Overview of Student Needs:

**Disability in the United States:**

- The percentage of people with disabilities in the US population rose from 11.9% in 2010 to 12.6% in 2013, 2014, and 2015. We expect that these numbers will continue to rise over time.

- In 2015, 34.9% of people with disabilities in the US ages 18-64 living in the community were employed compared to 76.0% for people without disabilities - a gap of 41.1 percentage points.
- https://disabilitycompendium.org/sites/default/files/user-uploads/2016_AnnualReport.pd
- In 2011–12, the percentage of undergraduates who reported having a disability was 11 percent for both males and females [**SOURCE:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2014* (2016-006), Chapter 3]

Recent statistics at UVA shown to the DAAC by SDAC prove that the number of students at UVA requesting accommodations is lower than the national average (it's about 5% when it should be 8%). Part of this can be attributed to the complicated process of securing a diagnosis before pursuing accommodations, but the other issue is campus climate. As a TA you can serve as a resource that connects students to SDAC and other aids.

## Analysis

As presented by the data points for UVA and the broader US educational system, the number of students in need of accommodations in higher education is continuing to rise. As educators we must confront the issue that most of our educational practices are out-of-date and that new technologies and educational methods offer us the opportunity to make the classroom a more inclusive space.

As you can see from the caseload presented above, the largest group of students on campus receiving accommodations fall under the category of those with psychological conditions. Students often incorrectly assume that accommodations only pertain to cognitive or physical disabilities, but this is not true. As evidenced in the statistics above, roughly 23% of students here receive accommodations for issues related to mental health. It is important to note that there is a limitation to the language we have available. Most students with psychological conditions (ie depression) would **not consider themselves "disabled"** and may not know that resources from SDAC are available to them. You can help breach this gap of language by introducing them to the wide range of accommodations possible. The following is an example of how you can introduce SDAC as a resource:

"I know that some of you already have accommodations in place, while others may need to seek them out during the term. If you suspect you may have a learning disability, physical disability, or psychological condition, SDAC can help you navigate what accommodations are possible. Their staff can assess your needs and organize the proper accommodations such as having a note taker, unavoidable absences, or extended deadlines."

## Resources on Campus:

**Student Disability Access Center:**

SDAC is located on the bottom floor of the Elson Student Health Center, at 400 Brandon Avenue. The office is open from 8 AM - 5 PM Monday - Friday during the school year. SDAC accommodations are open to both undergraduate and graduate students, and accommodations can be made in TA arrangements to ensure that you and your students receive any necessary support.

**What kind of accommodations are offered at UVA?**

The University offers a variety of accommodations for the classroom, as well as living accommodations (eg. housing/food accommodations). Below are the most common accommodations that you will directly engage with. At the start of each term, or as soon as an accommodation is officially granted, SDAC will send an email to both the professor and TA assigned to the course.

- **Exam accommodations** (such as extra time, reduced-distraction environment, etc.) Students can schedule for these to be proctored by SDAC but often slots to take exams near midterms and finals become full. It is your responsibility as a TA/instructor to ensure that a room in your department is booked as a quiet exam space.

- **Notetaking Services**:  Notetaking services can be invaluable to a student who has limitations in taking their own notes due to a disability. The SDAC typically will authorize a student with either the ability to record lectures or access peer notes. If a student has been authorized to record a lecture, then the student may have an electronic device (such as a computer, tablet, Smartpen, etc.) which has the ability to record the lecture. We ask that you allow the student to do so, even if you have banned such electronics from your classroom, in accordance with UVA Policy PROV-008.
  - The **Peer Notetaking Program** is a valuable accommodation/resource for students who have difficulty taking notes while listening to class lectures, have a physical disability prohibiting writing, or have unavoidable absences due to chronic illness. With these difficulties, provision of class notes may be considered a reasonable accommodation or auxiliary aid.
  - To secure a **Peer Notetaker** make an announcement that you are looking for a volunteer notetaker in the course during your next class session. **Do not disclose the name of the student with the disability receiving said notes.** Please direct volunteer notetakers to the [Notetaker Application form](#) on the SDAC online services portal to submit their information and begin uploading copies of their notes.
  - As a TA you can check the quality of these notes through the online portal. It's a good idea to check the notes a week or two into the course to ensure that they're legible, coherent, and comprehensive.

- **Alternative course materials ( e-text)**
  - Many students require accessible versions of the textbook, articles, or other course materials, especially if they have a print-related disability such as blind, low-vision, or have a learning disability related to reading. SDAC and the student tend to do the heavy

lifting here, but may reach out to the TA for access to some of the materials early to ensure that the student receives them in a timely manner.

- **Assistive Technologies**:

    - Read and Write Literacy Software
      A customizable, easy-to-use toolbar that seamlessly integrates with mainstream computer applications and offers you help as you work, highlights and reads text aloud using natural-sounding voices, and includes a comprehensive set of support tools. Free to all students, staff, and faculty via the ITS Software Gateway

    - Sonocent Audio NoteTaker
      A notetaking technology that records the audio from class lectures into your laptop or mobile app with features that include easy audio navigation, audio highlighting, and slides/image importing.

    - Livescribe Smartpen
      The smartpen is a ballpoint pen with an embedded computer and digital audio recorder. When used with Livescribe digital paper, it records what it writes for later uploading to a computer and synchronizes those notes with any audio it has recorded.

- **Screenings for AD/HD and/or Learning Disabilities**:  If you are having academic difficulties, SDAC may be able to assist. SDAC psychologists are available to meet with students who suspect that they may have an undiagnosed condition which may be impacting their learning, such as a Learning Disability (LD), Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD), a psychological disorder, head trauma, etc. While SDAC do not provide comprehensive diagnostic testing through our department, psychologists can gather a rich academic history and provide guidance about whether you should undergo testing.

- **ASL-English interpreting**

- **Real-time captioning**
    - If there is a student in your course who is D/deaf or hard of hearing, they may require real-time captioning to fully participate in the course. This is mostly done remotely, with the student using their computer and a small microphone to feed the audio to a stenographer, who will then send back the text directly to the student. If you are giving a lecture or leading a discussion, the best practice is to use a microphone, if available, and speak clearly and loudly to ensure that the stenographer can hear you. Please repeat any questions from the class into the microphone as well.

- **Flexibility on assignment deadlines**
    - It is expected that the student meet with the professor and/or TA well ahead of time to come up with a contingency plan should they need flexibility with assignment deadlines at any point in the semester. If they have not yet reached out, please feel free to reach out to them to initiate this conversation.

- **Advocacy in the event of a disability-related absence**
    - Similar to above, a student may have a condition which would occasionally impact their ability to attend courses/lecture. From the beginning, a student and the professor/TA should come up with a plan should a disability-related absence occur. Please note that the SDAC has disability documentation on file, and it is not good practice to require a doctor's note for each absence.

## The Accommodation Process

You are welcome to acknowledge yourself as an ally and a resource for disabled students, but **should not ask them to explain their condition.** You will receive a list of the accommodations that you will be responsible for incorporating in your classroom at the start of every term and any time a new accommodation is filed. You can pull up this list by signing onto the instructor portal for your class, as a TA or professor. You can also sign onto the portal to check the quality of notes taken by notetakers for the course. As a TA, it is important to assess the quality of notes to ensure they are legible and comprehensive.

At any time these lists can be pulled up by signing in via the [SDAC instructor portal](#).

### When should a student apply for accommodations?

Students should seek out accommodations as soon as possible if they have a known disability. If they are in the process of securing a diagnosis (especially if they suspect but have never been diagnosed with a learning disability), SDAC may be able to provide provisional accommodations to ensure that a student receives testing and support if necessary. If you suspect a student might need accommodations please tell them to reach out to SDAC. As a TA you are also welcome to reach out to their Dean who can advocate for them if their disability is affecting their performance in class.

### How does a student apply for accommodations?

Students can apply for services online on the [SDAC homepage](#). Students can schedule in-person meetings at SDAC to meet with an SDAC advisor. SDAC can be reached at [sdac@virginia.edu](mailto:sdac@virginia.edu) and by phone at **434-243-5180**.

SDAC also has a new Online Portal that is exceptionally easy to use. On this portal students can request accommodations before the start of each term. They can file initial applications and renew applications each year which will ensure that TAs/professors are notified of their needs.

## How can you make your classroom an inclusive space?

**Discuss accommodations with your students at the start of every term.**

Introduce them to the term disability and accommodations. Ensure that your students have access to the SDAC website (you can even show it on screen as a resource to them). You can also include the following statement on your section syllabus:

*The University of Virginia strives to provide accessibility to all students. If you require an accommodation to fully access this course, students can apply for services through the Student Disability Access Center (SDAC) online at www.sdac.studenthealth.virginia.edu. If you are unsure if you require an accommodation, or to learn more about their services, you may contact the SDAC at (434) 243-5180 or sdac@virginia.edu.*

**As disability is an intrinsic piece of individual identity, no one should be forced to disclose their disability.**

Many students who receive accommodations here at UVA do not consider themselves 'disabled.' Presenting the topic as inclusivity ensures that you are discussing accessibility rather than imposing an identity upon students with accommodations. Students have no responsibility whatsoever to disclose medical information to a TA or professor. They may have a stigmatized condition that they fear will reflect in poor treatment. The first thing to acknowledge is that many students have had poor experiences disclosing their condition in the past. When I was in undergraduate I was told that I looked fine and probably wasn't that sick. My need for accommodations was questioned, and some of my instructors argued that they didn't believe in the basis of accommodations, rhetorically defining accommodations as a hand out. It was incredibly discouraging to be questioned and treated as an outsider to the university community. I felt that my professors assumed that I was less capable than my peers and I then questioned whether I truly deserved accommodations. It is your job to ensure that you are an ally and not a barrier, and to acknowledge any inherent bias that you may have. We have been raised in an ableist society, and the rhetoric surrounding disability is complicated. You have the power to ensure that students feel valued, worthy of being here, and capable of success.

As a TA it is your job to ensure that students with disabilities are supported but not 'outed.' Their peers should have no sense of their accommodations unless they are personally asked. Eg. If you need to schedule a quiet exam room for numerous students, email them separately and ask if they mind testing in a room with a few others. Notetakers, the second most common accommodation, should not be told that they are taking notes for a particular student. Your students may have invisible illnesses, or may not present their disability in a visible manner, in which case it is your responsibility to keep a confidential relationship on the matter. If you need to speak with a student, email them or speak with them alone after class. Do not speak to a student about missing a deadline/class due to their disability in front of their peers. If you are particularly concerned about a student, ask that they come to your office hours or schedule a joint meeting with their dean.

**If possible try to avoid clear prohibitions in your classroom policies:**

**Computers:** some students need to take notes by computer. While many argue that taking notes by computer creates disjoint between notetaker and content, it is a necessary accommodation for many students. Computers can help those with physical impairments, they allow for streamlined notetaking at a faster speed which encourages organization. Computers can also be used for students who are D/deaf or hard of hearing to access real-time captions.

To entirely prohibit these in your classroom ensures that any student requesting an accommodation for the use of computers will be 'outed' to their classmates as a student with a disability. To create an inclusive environment, their disabilities and health needs should be prioritized over the assumption that students will browse their computers or disrupt class.

**Food/drink:** Based on your students' schedules they may miss meal times due to busy extracurricular schedules and academic schedules. Allowing students to eat/drink in class ensures that they are focused on content rather than hunger pains. For students with any health needs like diabetes, low blood pressure, etc. eating at regular intervals is vital for their health.

**Consider inclusivity during your lesson planning.**

Many of us use similar lesson planning for each discussion section. It can be helpful to vary up teaching strategies, as students generally learn in different ways. Mix discussion with online resources such as theme webs and interactive timelines. Ensure that there is a visual aspect, whether that's writing on the board, using digital technology, or using handouts. When creating assignments think about the accessibility of your sources. Can they be read by a text reader? Do video sources have closed captioning? Is there a way you can provide digital content and physical copies? How large is the print and is it easy to read?

**How can I help students who tell me they should have accommodations but don't yet?**

You can check your online portal to see if the accommodations have been requested for the class. You can also contact their dean or any staff member at SDAC to ask about the status of their accommodation.

**Is there anything I can do for a student who gets accommodations midway through a semester after failing their first assignment?**

You can speak with the professor for your class to ask about grandfathering in the accommodation. Although retroactive accommodations are not required by law, they are possible to offer informally. You can also offer an extra credit supplementary assignment if approved by the professor.

**<u>Myths Surrounding Disability</u>**

**Accommodations are a hand out that make life easier for disabled people.**

This is untrue, the nature of accommodation policy is to ensure that a disabled person is able to adapt to their learning/working environment so that they can perform to the same expectations their peers are held to. Accommodations acknowledge that a student can perform the same tasks when provided small changes (ie notetaker or time-and-a-half on examinations).

**Even when students have accommodations, they don't seem to use them, so they must not need them.**
It is ideal for students to secure accommodations even if they are unsure of their need for that particular course. Students might be able to finish an exam in the regular time allotted, or might not need to use extensions or absences. It is much easier for these accommodations to be in place at the start of the semester than to negotiate for them when in a disability-related crisis in the middle of the term.

**My students don't seem to be struggling at all, and they don't seem to look disabled.**

One major issue that new TAs have is understanding that disability does not always present itself as a visible feature. While you may perceive a student who is fidgeting, who looks inattentive and tired, or has a hard time expressing him/herself, these are common signs of a learning disability. Students with physical disabilities may be exhausted as well, and may be stressed with managing their health issues alongside school. Your students might have issues processing information, speaking in class, concentrating, or getting organized. This is especially true for first year students who are acclimating to a new environment and an entirely new way of learning.

This is not to say that you should excuse all behavior. How you approach a student, however, can greatly change their experience at school. Instead of calling them out in front of their peers, ask to speak with them after class or email them. It is better to approach a situation with understanding rather than frustration. There are clear steps you can take to ensure that the student is engaged and following class guidelines. Approaching them individually allows them to explain in private if they are struggling (this is beneficial for all students, not only those with disabilities). You can then work together to create inclusive learning strategies for the classroom. For example, if a student has a hard time processing, you can send them some main questions you'll discuss in section ahead of time so that they can prepare answers. You can also make it a point to call on them at the start of discussion so that they can directly answer a prepared question.

## Conclusion

This guide has been formed to give you a basic overview of the proper language to use when discussing the issue of inclusivity in your classroom. I hope that the sources have been organized in a way that highlights the resources on campus. Disabled students are just as capable as their able-bodied peers, and their time here at UVA should be full of positive experiences. Diversity on campus should not only be accepted, but fostered and viewed with pride. It is my greatest hope that students will find UVA to be a place of inclusivity, positivity, and accessibility.

Supporting disabled students as we move forward can take many forms: providing an inclusive classroom space, attending "Accessible Ally" training through the Equal Opportunities and Civil Rights office, supporting the Disability Studies Initiative at UVA, and promoting events about diversity on campus can all help to foster a more inclusive environment. If you have any question about the sources compiled here, or how to become better connected, feel free to personally email me at: nls4te@virginia.edu

Thank you so much for taking the time to read and think critically about this topic.

## Future Sources

If you are interested about the politics of disability or the creation of an inclusive environment, you can use the links below to get a better sense of the modern movement in education.

### Sources at UVA

The Center for Teaching Excellence here at UVA offers accessibility training and resource guides for new TAs

Disability Studies Initiative

Disability Action & Advocacy Committee

Student Disability Access Center (SDAC)

### Sources on Overall Statistics:

The NCCSD Clearing House and Resource Library statistics on college students with disabilities.

The list of sources below has been collected from Syracuse University's multitude of resources, in particular their Disability Cultural Center. If you have further questions about any topics, please visit their website.

### Language Use, Etiquette and Disabilities Studies

Note: these tend to emphasize person-first language. They are written by self-advocates and/or disability studies scholars.

United Spinal Association. (2008). Disability etiquette: Tips on interacting with people with disabilities. Jackson Heights, NY: Author.

Bell, C. M. *Blackness and disability: Critical examinations and cultural interventions*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2011.

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**Building an Inclusive Classroom:**

Project Do-It

Building Pedagogical Curb Cuts: Incorporating Disability in the University Classroom and Curriculum

A Guide to Planning Inclusive Events, Seminars, and Activities at Syracuse University

AHEAD: Association on Higher Education and Disability