

Students and Disabilities

Academia is a notoriously hostile place for students with disabilities.

5% of undergraduates with ADHD graduate. (Journal of Learning, 2008)

Disabilities are also common.

~11% of undergrads have a disability (National Center for Education Statistics)

At least 25% of college students with disabilities are diagnosed with ADHD. (Green and Rabiner)

It's often not clear to students transitioning from high school that they will need accommodations or what accommodations they need. Most students with learning disabilities first seek services in response to academic crises. (Lightner, Kipps-Vaughan, Schulte, Trice)

University policies are generally designed to comply with the law, not to actually provide disabled students equal access.

“Complying with the law” generally involves providing reasonable accommodations to students who identify themselves and pursue them.

There are few efforts to help students recognize they might be entitled to accommodations.

Accommodations

The normal accommodation process heavily relies on disabled students self-advocating: self-identifying themselves as having a disability, as needing accommodations, and identifying what accommodations would help them.

Present documentation of a disability and request specific accommodations. If approved, each term present professors with accommodation letters.

Extra steps for specific accommodations: students getting extra time need to register two weeks in advance for each exam.

Keep confidentiality, speak with students in private to establish how you'll provide the accommodation. If you for some reason can't provide the one requested (obligation is to accommodate student, not provide particular accommodation) reach out to DSP ASAP.

This process is not accessible to everyone:

Diagnoses can take a while! Doctors sometimes don't believe patient reports of particular symptoms they'd like accommodations for.

It can be hard for students to identify what accommodations are possible for them.

It's very reliant on self-advocacy, and involves a lot of steps, and some disabilities characteristically make that more difficult.

Some disabilities have features especially hard to accommodate through this process:

Ex. One of the diagnostic criteria of ADHD is not completing school or work assignments. Disability offices often don't want to approve a standing

accommodation for extensions on papers when needed because they think it makes these students less likely to get work in on time and at higher risk of things piling up, which is plausible, but it means these students aren't able to rely on a standing accommodation for an immediate consequence of their disability and, if it is to be accommodated through DSP at all, requires students to navigate the process for getting a special one-off accommodation when they're already struggling.

Universities generally provide forward-looking accommodations, not mitigate consequences already incurred by an unaccommodated disability.

A student in a mental health crisis might be able to get an incomplete as an accommodation if they apply for it right before the term ends, but if they aren't able to advocate for themselves until 2 weeks later after a professor has already given them an F because of incomplete work, many schools will not be willing to revise it.

Syllabus Statement

The mandatory syllabus statement about students with disabilities at USC is:

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website for DSP and contact information: (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) ability@usc.edu.

This gives the impression that students who qualify already know what to do. It does not include the definition of a disability so that students might recognize they would qualify. (There are lots of emerging mental health and health conditions and their ages!) It doesn't tell them they are legally entitled to reasonable accommodations. It gives the impression that requesting accommodations later in the term is a burden on your professors. It does not suggest that students might be welcome to discuss their needs with their professor or TA outside of conveying an already officially approved accommodation to them.

It would be good to add something like:

Students with disabilities are legally entitled to reasonable accommodations to ensure equal access to education. The ADA defines a disability as a medical condition that substantially limits one or more major life activities—including seeing, walking, sleeping, taking care of yourself, learning, and regulating your emotions—or major bodily functions. If you have a medical condition—including mental health conditions—that significantly interferes with your schoolwork, you probably qualify.

I am committed to providing students with equal access to this class. If you are struggling because of a medical condition, please reach out. If you are struggling for reasons it is hard to put words to, please reach out as well.

Symptoms of many disabilities and health conditions can worsen with stress, so it's not especially suspicious for a student to suddenly need accommodations around deadlines or exams.

Students that disappear

It's pretty common for students to fail to complete major assignments, not reach out, and not respond to emails about it. This is a pretty clear sign of low functioning; I think almost all of these students have mental health conditions or ADHD, diagnosed or undiagnosed, and are often in crisis.

These students are typically failed. If they stop attending and completing assignments before the withdrawal deadline, you can also give them an “unofficial withdrawal,” or UW. This counts as an F towards their GPA and so shuffles them towards falling under the GPA threshold for automatic suspension, I imagine by design.

Encourage students who have not turned in papers to send you whatever they have. Especially with ADHD, they may have completed a significant portion of it and are spinning their wheels on organizational last steps.

For students that reach the end of the term with incomplete work, grading them out as though the assignment didn't exist is less burdensome than an incomplete, and incompletes are far preferable to failing.

It is common for people in situations like this to have trouble describing what is happening to them. It is hard to reach out to an instructor when you can't explain what is happening to you, and don't know how they can help.

I think they're often not reading their emails by the time they're in crisis. One thing we can do is, on syllabi, **explain how we can help students in this situation by providing late paper guidance in addition to late paper penalties.** Example syllabus language:

Missing a deadline is a stressful experience. Sometimes it's just the result of a one-off timing issue, but sometimes it's the result of something more persistent—struggling with the material, life circumstances, mental state—and the source of trouble is not always obvious from the inside. Students in this situation often blame themselves and feel like they could just complete the assignment the next day if they just do what they should, but the next day might not be any easier if the issue is persistent, and the stress snowballs as late penalties accumulate. Students sometimes fail classes because they get trapped in this cycle and ultimately never submit the assignment.

If you are in this situation, I can help.

If you are going to miss a deadline:

1. Email me *whatever you have* before the deadline. (If you have late penalties, you might waive/reduce the first one for this.)
2. Stay in contact with me until you finish. We will make a plan to get you back on track.