



*a podcast about
how we learn,
how we teach,
and how they overlap*

Episode 32 - Disabled Students and College Expectations

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

Dinur: And I'm Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles.

And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn and how we teach and how they overlap.

Adam: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 32: Disabled Students and College Expectations.

Dinur: When you're a disabled student, college is that much more difficult and confusing. Using the services available for disabled students can help level this playing field. In this episode, I'm going to interview Adam about the process of getting disability support if you're a disabled student, because Adam has experience with this.

Adam: So, yeah, I've been both a disabled student and a disabled teacher. I also have a lot of disabled students. I know what it's like and so you know when [inaudible] and I were talking about this, I said, "Hey, why don't you just interview me since I know a ton about this, having been through it?" And he said, "That sounds good." So, over to you, Dinur.

Dinur: So the first question is kind of basic, but what is a disability?

Adam: So, according to American law - and now, this is, we are going to be discussing this in terms of American disability law and American accommodations. So if you are not in the United States, you will need to look this up for your own country, but - "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities" is what the U.S. defines as a disability.

Dinur: So I want to dive into that a little deeper. And the first question is, what is an impairment?

Adam: So, an impairment is anything that gets in the way of, basically, living like a nondisabled person. Now, most people are familiar with visible disabilities. If you're in a wheelchair, if you have to use a cane or if you've got to be on crutches or if you use a walker, if you're Deaf, it's probably pretty obvious within about half a minute that you don't speak with your voice and you don't hear with your ears. If you're blind, there's a white

cane or a guide dog or both. So sometimes there are big, visible symbols that say, "Hey, I have an impairment. I am unable to walk. I am unable to see. I am unable to hear."

But that doesn't really bring to mind a lot of disabilities that are invisible. So, mental health problems like anxiety or depression or OCD, obsessive compulsive disorder, and other mental health issues. And it also doesn't bring to mind the neurological differences like autism or ADHD or ADD.

These are disabilities. They impair major life activities. They limit them, but they're often not obvious.

Dinur: Now, when you say "life activity," what do you mean by that?

Adam: So for this, I'm just going to go to the Department of Labor of the United States, and I'm going to give just their definition, and we'll put the link to this back in the show notes. So: "Major life activities include, but are not limited to -" so, these are just examples - "caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, seeing, hearing, eating, sleeping, walking, standing, lifting, bending, speaking, breathing, learning, reading, concentrating, thinking, communicating and working." So there's a lot there, all right?

And I'll just go into a couple of these. There may be a person who has a feeding tube, because they have a stomach disorder, and so they can't, maybe they can't swallow, okay. Or maybe they've had a surgery that requires them, now, to have a feeding tube. That impairs a major life ability.

Some of these are really relevant to education, like learning, or reading, or concentrating, or thinking, or communicating. I can think of an assignment for every single one of those that would be problematic, all right? If you are telling someone "you have to read the book," and they can't read, because they have dyslexia; or, if you're telling someone that they need to take a test and focus on it, and concentration is a problem because they have ADD; or even thinking, where, if you have a mental illness like schizophrenia, the hallucinations are going to get in the way - like, auditory hallucinations, for example. Which thoughts are yours, and which thoughts are just the mental illness doing its thing? Communicating. If a person is mute or if they're Deaf, and so they communicate in sign language, or if they're like me, autistic, and they have trouble figuring out what nonverbals mean - all of those impair major life activities.

And then recently the Department of Labor expanded this to also include major bodily functions. So that includes: functions of the immune system, abnormal cell growth, digestive bowel, bladder, neurological, brain, respiratory, circulatory, endocrine and reproductive functions.

So, for example, if you have something like liver cancer, that's a disability, because that's going to affect what you can do. You're probably going to be taking chemotherapy. The drugs you take for the pain may make it very difficult for you to pay attention in class. If you have a bladder disorder, where you have to have a catheter, all right? That's going to be a major life activity, a major bodily function that gets in the way of what you're trying to do with your life.

So these are things that are covered by disability law in the United States. If you have a problem with those, you're entitled to accommodations, to workarounds, to, basically, ways to level the playing field a little bit, so that the fact that it's hard for you to read doesn't get in the way of your learning.

Dinur: Now, have you had any non-disabled students or non-disabled faculty members kind of cynically question why disabled students get these accommodations, like extra time, and view it like cheating?

Adam: Absolutely. And I've even had students who are disabled say, "But I can't take accommodations, because that's like cheating!"

So, there are cultural stigmas about disability, especially invisible disability. And a lot of people, when they think "accommodations," they think, you know, "ramps for wheelchairs." Well, when I was in undergrad, I already had rheumatoid arthritis, and there was a period in my late undergrad and early graduate school where I was in a wheelchair. And I went to a college to present at a conference, one of my very first conferences when I was an undergrad, and there were no wheelchair ramps. It was all stairs. And I had to have someone who worked at the college actually literally be a ramp, or rather, be a handrail for me.

And it was very painful to get up and down the stairs and there was no way to get to the second floors. There were no elevators. And granted, it was an old college, but it was totally out of compliance with disability law. And the only reason that it got away with it was because it was a private college. And private colleges will often say, you know, "we don't have to follow federal laws on this." You know, "we're a private college." And I don't believe that's actually true. But they may have said, "well, we don't have the money to retrofit all these buildings that were built in, like, 1898 to current disability standards."

There are cultural stigmas about disability, and when it comes to invisible disability, it's even worse. Because, for example, I'm autistic. And when I tell people "I'm autistic and I can't figure out what you mean by the way your face looks," they get annoyed with me, because that means that people who aren't disabled have to work harder to communicate with me. I'm already working hard, but I can't figure out what your face means. I'm sorry. If you want me to know you're angry, you actually have to say those words. If you want me to know, you're afraid, you have to say it - I can't figure out what your face means just by the way it looks. That's part of my disability.

I had a clash with a professor in graduate school, where I was entitled to double time on tests because of the processing problems that the autism causes. They wanted to insist that I do double the work. They were not okay with giving me double time, and one of the disability services officers from the campus actually had to walk up to this professor's office and say, "This is the law. You do not get to say that this student can't have these accommodations."

I have heard of professors who refused to give accommodations, even though the law said they had to, because they had the same disability that the student had, but they had not gotten accommodations when they were in school, so they didn't want anybody else to get it. Basically, it's this idea that "if I had to work my way through it, then you have to work your way through it," and that's education as hazing, and the law's not cool with that.

Now, a lot of people will still say, "But isn't it like cheating? They're getting double time." Well, if you know someone who wears glasses, or if you wear glasses yourself, is it cheating to wear the glasses? Because without them - you can't see. Without them, you may not be able to read, or drive, or perform basic life activities, right? We have normalized the disability of short-sightedness and farsightedness. Wear glasses or just - people just wear glasses. It's not a thing. But technically, a person who's wearing glasses is disabled. Is that cheating to wear glasses?

If it's not cheating to wear glasses when you can't see without them, then it is not cheating to get double time when your brain will not focus.

And the thing is that some students will also say, well, you know, and I know I discussed this in a recent episode. I had a student at one of the private schools that I worked at for a little while, who needed birth control pills and they also needed, um, antidepressants, but they came from a culture where it was extremely stigmatized to help to get any medical help at all for disability. You were supposed to just soldier on through it, put your shoulder to the wheel and just push, even if it harmed you. And she was worried that if she took what the school's medical office was suggesting she take, that word would get back to her mother.

So the thing is, this is an issue that a lot of people who may be disabled and are afraid to take accommodations worry about, your parents and your prospective employers will not be told if you're accessing services unless you give permission for them to be told. And Dinur, I know you had a student who was a prospective police officer who was worried about this.

Dinur: Several. So a while back I was teaching a class and I had some students who are interested in becoming police officers. And a few of them mentioned that if they, if police departments find out that they're potential cadets or the recruits went to therapy, then they were not admitted into the Academy.

And this was the job that they had their heart set on. They wanted to do it. And one of the things I told them, after verifying with counseling was, "Counseling does not release records unless you give them permission to, which means effectively if you do not tell someone that you've gone to therapy, no one is going to know.

That also, however, really speaks loudly to the stigma about disability because instead of the police department acting responsibly and saying, "Okay, you had this problem and you were taking care of it," now a potential recruit is stigmatized. Some may not get the help they need, because they're afraid they won't get hired and they don't know that counselors cannot release this information. And that means that ultimately we may be dealing with police officers who are battling their own battles with mental illness, while trying to do this job and while fighting the stigma. And that puts everyone in a worse situation.

Adam: And the problem is that we also see a lot of blaming of - and this is slightly off-topic - but we see a lot of blaming of people who are mentally ill for things like school shootings. And that is not mental illness. That is not what drives people to commit gun crimes. And we could go into a big, big discussion of that, but I think that's a whole different podcast, not just a whole different episode.

So the thing is that a lot of students won't use this information, because they are ashamed of being disabled. So yes, there's stigma, but there are two ways to handle stigma. One of them is to crumple up and hide and not get the help you need, and the other is to say, "Yeah, I have a mental illness. What's your problem? I'm taking the meds for it, I'm going to therapy for it, and I need a little help to be able to parse this exam."

Or, "Yeah, I am visually impaired and I can't drive, and I need someone to read the exam to me so that I can understand what I'm being asked," or, "Yeah, I can't write because I have a neurological condition called dysgraphia, which means that my hand will not make letters. I can't take notes. So I do need someone in every class to give me copies of their notes."

None of those are cheating. All those are a hand up for someone who is already several steps down on the ladder, because of their disabilities.

Dinur: So how can students use this information?

Adam: So now we're talking to students who either already know they're disabled or they're worried about being disabled. So let's talk to each group in turn.

So, if you know you're disabled, bring your medical results, bring your psychiatric results. You know, all of those tests that you've gone through that show that you have, um, you know, Crohn's disease, if that's especially bad, or if you have an anxiety disorder, or if you've got autism or if you have, um, you know, you need to use a cane and soon it's going to be harder for you to get from point A to point B - Bring that to the student disability support center on your campus. Every campus should have one. A few private colleges may not, but most public schools will have them.

And what you do is you just tell them "This is, here's my stuff." You give it to them. They may need to interview you. They may not, they may just say, "okay, we'll, we'll be back to you soon." They process it and then they either give you documentation to take to your professors, or in some schools, like my school for example, they just send an email to the professor saying "this student has provided evidence that they have these disability -" or, "that they have a disability." We don't get told what the disability is. So, "this student has provided evidence of a disability and here are the accommodations that the law requires you to give them."

These accommodations can run the gamut from, say, a student with a cane. I had this when I was trying to use a cane for my arthritis. I was scheduled in a class that was in one end of the campus, and the next class was at the other end of the campus, and the passing period was 11 minutes, and there was no way that I could get from point A to point B. And so the disability services office told the second professor, "you're going to have to let him show up a little late. There's nothing we can do about that." And the first professor was told "you gotta let him leave five minutes early because it takes him about 20 minutes to get across campus," and neither of them really liked it, but both of them had to deal with it.

Now if you only suspect you're disabled, like if the words won't stay put on the page, or if it's so hard to read because it gives you a headache, or you know that it's really painful to walk because your knees are killing you but you're not sure what to do about it - talk to your doctor first. Talk to them about your concerns and say, "I have these symptoms. Can we see if we can get me some screenings or tests to rule out whether I'm disabled or not?"

And then once you have results that confirm whether or not you have a disability, if they confirm it, then go to the student disability support center. And then just do the same thing I told people who already know they're disabled, you know, "here's my paperwork." And then you either get paperwork to take to your professors or they send a notification to your professors and say, "Hey, this student is entitled to a quiet room to take a test. They're entitled to double time on tests. They're entitled to someone to um, write their paper for them because they can't see. And so they need somebody to type it up," or "they're entitled to someone to read their test to them," or whatever it is. And then the professors have to kind of work with that. Well, no, not "kind of." Professors have to work with that because the law says they do.

Dinur: So the next question, or the next part is, how can teachers and professors use this information to help our disabled students?

Adam: Okay, so the first things first, be aware of your legal responsibilities, teachers, professors. You do not get to choose whether you give these accommodations. They have determined, through your campus disability services center, that the student is entitled to them. It's the law. You don't get to say, well, "I don't want to give him double time on tests." You don't get to say that. I mean you can say that, and you can get in a lot of trouble, or you can say, "all right, I have to give him double time on tests" and figure out a way to do that.

It's usually not hard.

Also, you are not allowed to disclose the student's disability to anyone else on or off campus. Not to other students, not to your colleagues, not to anyone else. That's also the law.

So, design your courses as if all the students are disabled. This is called "Universal Design for Learning," or UDL. This makes it a lot easier to give students accommodations when you get the directive from the student disabilities office that you know this particular student needs double time on a test. Now we have several different resources. We have several different resources that we're going to put in show notes. So one of them is from Vanderbilt. And Vanderbilt University has a Universal Design for Learning page, and they're talking about how there are three main dimensions or three main concepts that go into the Universal Design for Learning: clarity of objectives, flexibility and options, and accessibility.

So clarity of objectives means that what you are giving the students makes it clear what you need them to learn or what you expect them to do. And then the second thing is flexibility and options, and this is where you offer a flexible structure. So I do this with my classes, where I offer them a number of different kinds of assignments they can complete, and I base their grade on how many groups of those assignments they completed with passing scores. So the students who really aren't good at taking quizzes, they don't have to. They can do a writing assignment. The kids who are not good at presentations, they can write a paper. So they get options, and this means that you have to be willing to give your students a number of options, of different ways, of showing you that they have learned what you are talking about, that they understand what you are talking about.

And then, finally, the last thing that needs to be in there is accessibility. So if you have, for example, a PDF file, make sure it's screen-readable. If it's not, there are ways to convert it to screen-readable, or you can send it to the disability services center and they'll have someone read it onto a tape, so that the person who needs to hear it can actually hear it.

Vanderbilt provides a Course Accessibility Checklist, and this is not as broad as UDL, but for example, you want to make sure that students have physical access to your classroom and this is more, the university is probably going to have to make sure that there are accessible parking spaces; accessible entrances; accessible ways to get to a second or third or fifth or 12th floor; that there's seating up front for people who need interpreters or some kind of captioning; that there's restroom access, something that's more of a, this is something that's more of an institutional issue.

But then when it comes to curriculum, are you providing course readings in accessible format? So, are they electronic files that can be read on a screen reader? Are they, uh, videos that have captions? Are they files that can be made large print, so that people who have trouble reading or seeing small print can actually read them? Do you have inclusive language used throughout the course objectives?

And I want to speak specifically to this. A lot of people use what's called "person-first" language and that's appropriate sometimes, and not appropriate others. For example, it is not common to say "a person with deafness" and in fact many Deaf people will take offense if you say that. It is a Deaf person - and capital D, because Deafness is not just a disability. It is actually its own language culture.

If you say "a person with cancer" that's appropriate, cancer is not an ongoing thing that you have for your entire life; it doesn't form your personality; it doesn't form your identity.

“A person with diabetes” - that’s dicey. Some people would rather be called “a diabetic” because they have to live with it for their whole life.

As a person who is autistic, I am not okay with being called a “person with autism,” and I don’t know any adult autistic who is okay with being called a “person with autism.” Autism is central to being an autistic. It is part of my neurology. It is part of how my brain is wired. It does not go away - and if it was made to go away, I would not be me anymore. It completely forms who I am. So saying “person with autism,” that’s kind of like saying “person with maleness” instead of just saying “man,” it’s like saying “person with femaleness” instead of just saying “woman.” And so that’s, you know, that can be problematic.

Another resource that we can give you is from understood.org which talks about Universal Design for Learning. And again this talks about, you know, what you need to know. The three main principles of Universal Design are representation, which is where you offer the information in more than one format, action and expression. Giving people more than one way to interact with the material and engagement and finding multiple ways to show students that it’s something that they want to do. So letting them have choice, for example, uh, giving them assignments that are actually relevant to their lives. So don’t make all of the essays that you are making them read about able-bodied, white, cis men. You know, have something in there about a wheelchair user, have something in there about an autistic person, have something in there about a woman who is dealing with infertility.

These are all considered disabilities. And they should all be recognized in your course content.

And be aware too, that Universal Design, it makes it easier for everyone. And we’re not saying that it makes the course easier to pass, but it makes the course easier to process. Do you understand the difference here? That, you know, passing it, it’s still the same level of difficulty, but understanding what you have to do in order to pass it should not be hard. It should be very clear and transparent.

Now be aware that, you know, for example, closed captions, we put closed captions on our videos. They’re designed for Deaf people, but they also help everyone else learn and understand the video. If you are a chemistry professor and you are providing a video, you’re going to have a lot of very technical terms. Students may need to be able to look them up. If you have captions and the captions are spelled correctly, they can look it up and they can pause you and write it down from the caption. Everybody can do that, not just Deaf people.

And be aware that some accommodations are going to require you to let the students record your lectures, let them come in late, or make arrangements to take tests outside of the classroom or get extra time on their assignments and exams. It doesn’t matter whether you like it or not, it’s the law. So being okay with it, that’s not relevant. Your job is to make sure that your students can get the information they need in order to do their job in your class.

Dinur: And really, why wouldn’t you want that? Why wouldn’t you want to give everyone the best shot possible to understand the material that you’re teaching?

Adam: Well, I think that takes us into a whole different episode that we could talk about. You know, the professors who really do see it as hazing? Professors? Stop doing that.

Dinur: Right?

Adam: Stop doing that.

Dinur: So that's what Adam and I have for you in Episode 32. If you're finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends! We're always hoping to get new subscribers, so we can help even more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Android. We're hosted on Blubrry.com. Also, we'd really appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Adam: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 33, when we'll start a three-part series about academic services, beginning with: how do we make students aware of these services?

Dinur: You've been listening to Learning Made Easier, a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Adam: We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

Dinur: If you want to support us, please go to www.patreon.com/learningmadeeasier.

Adam: We look forward to seeing you next week!