

# WOMEN

Our  
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IN HIGHER EDUCATION



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## How to Have the Accommodations Talk

This is the fourth in a series of columns on disability in higher education for this publication. In [the first column of this series](#), I described how I worked to make my teaching universally accessible for all of my students, not just my students with disabilities. The impetus for the change in my teaching was a meeting with a disabled student. When she approached me, I asked her to tell me about what challenges she faced in the classroom. Given those challenges, I changed my teaching, and I found—to my surprise—that all of my students benefited from the changes. I'd stumbled upon [universal design](#), in this case teaching design that makes learning more accessible for everyone.

I'm briefly retelling this story as a preface to this column because this column is about the meeting that inspired my teaching changes in the first place—the meeting when my student approached me to request accommodations.

I'm very grateful to Past Katie for not ruining that student meeting. Over the years, I've since researched how to have these meetings better, since faculty and staff rarely receive training on how to meet with disabled students. (Did you receive training? I sure didn't.) Here are some tips for how to have the accommodations talk with your students.

### 1. What Do I Do First When a Student Approaches Me to Request Disability Accommodations?

First, smile. (Smile even if you're not a smiler. Smile anyway. Trust me.) Next, say something like this: "I'm so glad you are sharing this information with me. I want to hear more." Your demeanor and your very first words will make the student feel that you aren't uncomfortable (which you won't be after you read this column), or worse, resentful. The best way to tank this meeting is to make an already-nervous student believe you don't want her to come to you.

A surprising number of faculty and staff are resentful when students approach them with disability accommodations requests. Because of this resentment, which these students have faced over and over (believe me, they have), students have developed defense mechanisms. This defense mechanism might make a student seem, you know, defensive when she first approaches you. Rather than acting judgmental, understand where this defensive emotion is coming from. The defensiveness is not about you—it's about every other time in this student's life when she was treated badly because of her disability.

Let's break down resentment and defensiveness for a moment.

A student with a disability faces stigma. Stigma comes in a variety of forms. She might have to face the misperception that, because of her disability, she does not belong in higher education. She might have to face the misperception that her disability isn't real or that it isn't bad enough for accommodations. Or she might have to face the misperception that her disability is so bad that she can't succeed at all. Sometimes she has to face all of these misperceptions at the same time, putting her in a double bind—is her disability bad enough to warrant accommodations? And if her disability is actually so bad, shouldn't she just quit school? Sometimes the same person will say both of these things to her at once, forcing her to walk a disability tightrope.

When a student comes to you to have the accommodations talk, she doesn't know which of these beliefs you hold, or if you hold them all. So it is your job to reassure her that you believe her, and that you want to help her succeed in school.

### 2. Do I Need to Protect My Student's Privacy?

Absolutely. The best thing you can do to show how much you respect your student's privacy is to offer a private place to talk. For instance, if a student approaches you after class about accommodations, offer an office space where you can speak privately. If a work-study student whom you supervise comes to you in a semipublic place, invite the student to a private conference room or to your office. Chances are the student is nervous about revealing her disability to you (for all of the reasons I discussed in point #1), and offering privacy will help put her at ease.

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Reassure her that you will continue to protect her privacy, both from other students and other faculty. Remember, students are not required to share their disability accommodation needs with faculty. She might have chosen to share her disability with you, but not with another professor. She might have chosen you because, for some reason, she trusts you. (That's a gift.) She might not feel that same level of trust with her other professors. Do not presume that she shared her disability with all of her professors. That means that, even if you know that she is in a class with a colleague of yours, you should not discuss her disability with that colleague.

Remember, as the faculty or staff member, you hold a position of power in the first meeting about accommodations. So take the initiative to tell the student that you will not discuss her disability. Tell her you will protect her privacy. Don't make her ask you to do so.

### 3. What If the Student's Disability Is One That I Know a Lot About?

Whatever you do, do not lecture the student on her own disability. I have had students come to me with the same disability that I have—literally the same diagnosis. And I have learned that the very best thing I can do is to keep my mouth shut and let my students teach me about their disabilities.

Let your student lead the conversation. Let her tell you what her needs are. Let her decide what, precisely, she needs to succeed in your class. Don't make those decisions for her. For example, don't insist that she sit in a certain place in the classroom or insist that she use a note-taker. She is in charge of what she needs regarding her accommodations. Don't force accommodations on her.

Work together to come up with a plan, one that you can work with and one that will meet the student's needs. If you work together in good faith, you will figure out a plan. If you find yourself stumped in trying to develop class-

room or workplace accommodations, reach out to your on-campus student disability services office for ideas—they are professionals who do learning design for a living. You aren't alone in this.

### 4. What If It Seems That My Student's Disability Has Changed, Disappeared, or Gotten Better During the Semester?

Don't be suspicious of your students with disabilities. Just don't.

Remember that all disabilities (both physical and psychiatric) can be changeable and unpredictable and inconsistent. Sometimes physical impairments require mobility aids and sometimes they don't. We all have good days. Just because your student is having a good day or good week—

or is appearing to—doesn't mean your student is faking needing a mobility aid. It means that when your student is able to walk unassisted, she wants to walk unassisted.

Disabled people have been deemed untrustworthy by Western science, medicine and law since time immemorial. That statement is not an exaggeration. In courtrooms, our memories are questioned on the witness stand. At the government level and the workplace level, the burden of proof for disability benefits is incredibly high. Don't become a cliché and mistrust your student because she seems to be having a week with more spoons—a disability community term used to describe the energy it takes to perform daily tasks. [Try setting aside your suspicions and learn about spoons](#) instead.

To summarize: if you welcome your disabled student when she approaches you, offer her privacy and discretion, let her be the expert about her disability (and use campus services when needed), and believe her story about her disability (both at the beginning and throughout your relationship), you are well on the way to being a strong advocate for students with disabilities.

—KRGP

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