Universal Access For Teaching and Learning - FAQ

This document is intended to provide faculty with information about creating accessible and inclusive learning environments for a wide range of learners, including students with disabilities. Guidance for faculty regarding roles and responsibilities in compliance with Smith's obligations under civil rights law are included along with suggestions for incorporating broader principles and practices of Universal Instructional Design in your classroom that benefit all learners.

What are the College’s legal obligations related to disability and how does Smith handle coordinating accommodations?

Smith College has legal obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act to assure equal access to our programs and services and to remove barriers that limit full participation. This can include proactive barrier removal as well as providing individualized accommodations to students with identified disabilities. Disability is defined under these laws as “a significant limitation is a major life function.” We are required on a case by case basis to engage in an interactive process to understand the functional limitations disabled students experience and make modifications to policies and procedures, as well as offer specific services, accommodations, and supports to assure equal access. Accommodations and services are designed to compensate for barriers in the learning environment and essentially “level the playing field.” Extended time for exams, extensions, note takers, recording lectures, sign language interpreters, and audio books are common accommodations. They are not designed to afford disabled students special advantages and the College is not obligated under the law to lower academic standards or fundamentally alter the nature of our programs. We are not obligated to assure success, but neither is the law meant to be reductive. The needs of disabled students must be part of our ongoing quest for effective and creative teaching and inclusion strategies that support the success of all students, including students with disabilities.

Do students have to provide medical documentation of their disabilities in order to receive accommodations and services?

The ADA and 504 require students to self-identify as a person with a disability and make their need for supports and services know in a timely manner. The college may ask for medical, educational or other forms of information to help determine if a student
has a disability and what accommodations and services are needed, especially when their disability is non-apparent or when the limitations are not obvious. Congress did not intend this to be a burdensome process for disabled individuals in terms of effort or expense in ways that might limit their right to equal access. If a disability is obvious, or its limitations are known through personal interactions we cannot impose extensive documentation requirements.

**What about confidentiality?**

Contact with the Office of Disability Services is confidential and information about a student’s diagnosis is kept within ODS. In accordance with FERPA we share information about a student’s access needs on a need to know basis with the permission of the student. Students sign a release form that allows ODS to communicate about accommodations with their faculty, their advisers, the field office, and the Associate Dean. Faculty may talk with one of these individuals if there is a concern, but may not share information with other faculty members or students. Please be mindful about speaking to a student about their disability needs in front of the class or any other student, staff or faculty member. Please keep any communication from ODS in a private file. It is important to remember too that faculty may not ask a student about their specific diagnoses or for details about their condition. Students may wish to share this information on their own, but since you are not in a clinical situation, the answer will not be very helpful. What you really want to ask is a question like: “Is there anything I need to know that would help me support you to be successful in my class?” This is also the kind of question we might ask all our students at the beginning of the term, perhaps having them write on an index card or share with you through email, etc.

**How will I be notified about the accommodations students need?**

Faculty are notified about required accommodations or modifications by a letter from the Office of Disability Services. The letter is usually delivered by the student and should be reviewed as soon as possible. Any concerns about the applicability or feasibility of the required accommodations should be brought to the attention of the Disability Services Director immediately. Faculty should not confront students, ask for justification, or negotiate changes with the students directly, unless the students engages you in that discussion.
**What is SSW’s Universal Access commitment all about?**

Universal Access, is an educational philosophy and practice that anticipates a wide range of learners and supports the design and delivery of curriculum using multimodal strategies that create an accessible and inclusive learning environment for all students, without the need for individualized accommodation. The School for Social Work has taken the lead by making a specific commitment to “universal access” which means the administration and faculty work consciously and proactively toward dismantling structural forms of ableism/access barriers such as intentional and unintentional policies and practices that may discriminate or have the effect of privileging certain types of learners while disadvantaging or excluding others. This forward-thinking approach encourages creativity in designing a dynamic learning environment for different learning styles, needs, and abilities while gaining comfort in using a wider range of instructional modalities. Creating more inclusive classrooms through Universal Access strategies allows us to simultaneously examine and address educational impacts at the intersections of race, class, ability, educational preparedness, and cultural differences that require embracing different ways of learning and knowing that align with the college’s diversity and equity commitments.

Universal Access strategies are a way to meet our obligations under the law, by simply employing good educational practices to reach all learners. This is a departure from viewing the problem in the individual and requires stepping back and illuminating the embedded problems in the learning environment. Removing these barriers often eliminates the need for accommodations. Employing multimodal instructional methods helps all students access the material in the manner that is most effective for their learning, and reinforces course information for all students. One simple universal design framework is to use more than one method to foster student engagement, expression, and evaluation. For more ideas about accommodations for specific types of disabilities and some history about the concept of Universal Design, go to the Faculty Room at the University of Washington:


Universal design, as an approach to learning has immediate benefits:

- It normalizes is the need for integrated learning supports.
- Identifying barriers within the environment gives faculty a chance to better facilitate learning in the classroom for a wide range of students.
● It can reduce the need for reactive accommodations by creating a seamlessly accessible and inclusive environment for all students.
● Eliminates the need for students with disabilities to self identify in order to get the help they need.
● It can eliminate the need for some students to provide the college with expensive documentation.
● It can allow some students to function completely independently in the classroom.
● It prevents having to draw attention to a person needing an accommodation.
● Shifts away from policing disabled student’s need for technology as a way of managing unethical and disruptive classroom behavior.

How can I make sure that everyone in my class can read the materials I have assigned?

Provide course materials in accessible formats: To assure the accessibility of reading and curriculum materials, all materials posted on Moodle must be in an accessible format. Word documents, powerpoints, and non-image PDFs are acceptable formats. Basically, if you can cut and paste a line in a document, it is in an accessible format. To assist you in converting documents yourself, you may use a multifunction device to scan and OCR your documents before posting. You may also upload to an online service called RoboBraille where your document will be converted and returned to you within a few minutes. If you need assistance converting documents to accessible formats, a link for document conversion is located on every moodle page or you can use the link provided here:

http://www.robobraille.org/web3 smith/

Please be mindful that many electronic books are not accessible, because they can’t be used with a student’s optimal reading or learning tools, even if they have a reading function built in. If they cannot be made available as or turned into a PDF or other accessible format, check with the publisher to see if a hard copy can be obtained. If not, please look for another option.

Do I need to use captioned video materials in classes? What if no one in class is Deaf?

Captioning: Captions benefit many students with different types of disabilities and in fact may benefit all students who struggle at times to hear poor audio in a video or
movie as well as those learning new vocabulary. To assure communication accessibility, **all videos shown in class must be captioned.** Captions should be activated at the beginning of the video so that no one is on the spot to request it, and to avoid having to stop the video, etc. Check the accuracy of captions for online videos on YouTube or Vimeo, etc or contact the content administrator to see if they can be added. If you have older videos that are not captioned that are important to delivering content in your course please contact Joanne Cannon jcannon@smith.edu in Educational Technology Services who can assist you with captioning resources and support.

Check the web streaming service KANOPY, available on the SSW Books and Media webpage [http://libguides.smith.edu/socialwork/booksandmedia](http://libguides.smith.edu/socialwork/booksandmedia). KANOPY holds a wide range of videos across disciplines. Chances are you may find the video you are hoping to use. If you find a video on KANOPY that is not captioned, let the the SSW OAS know or inform the circulation librarian and they will work with KANOPY to have captions created within a few days. Alternatively, consider other ways to deliver the content covered in the video that is not captioned.

**Someone in my class has asked for a note taker, what do I do?**

**Note takers:** If a student comes to see you needing a note taker, please direct them to Disability Services. Note takers for students with disabilities will be coordinated by the Office for Disability Services. You will receive a letter from Disability Services to send to the students in your class. The letter requests a volunteer to be a note taker and to contact the disability services directly to arrange for payment. Disability services will facilitate connecting the note taker with the student who needs the service. Employing universal access methods, some professors proactively appoint a student note taker for the whole class and share those notes in Moodle, some post their own lecture notes, or share their powerpoints with their students prior to class can

**What should I do if a student approaches me for permission to record my class for disability reasons?**

**Recording in class:** Classes may be recorded for educational purposes by disabled students with permission from the instructor or the Office for Disability Services. Students who need to record are not doing this to “keep a record” of what has been said in class, but to review key information multiple times or enrich notes taken in class when this is a struggle for them. Recorded information is not to be shared in any manner and a responsible use agreement can be signed by the disabled student at the professor’s request. Give the open use of technology, faculty might want to have all students sign a
responsible use agreement regarding in class information so as not to single out a disabled student. Likewise you may not announce to the class that a particular student will be recording or ask their permission for a disabled student to record. Please contact Disability Services if you need to talk this through.

**What if someone asks for extensions?**

**Extensions:** A student with a disability may come to you for extensions as any other student would, but it will be indicated in their accommodation letter if it is necessary accommodation. The school encourages a measured approach to extensions. We suggest you offer the students 1-5 days extensions typically, and an additional 2-3 days should they need extra time. It is generally recommended that students are not given lengthy extensions without a new due date.

**What can I do for students who are often late to class or requesting excused absences?**

**Absences:** Given the structure of the program no student may exceed the 20% rule. If a student has a health crisis that leads to additional absences please consult Dean O’Neill. It is difficult to allow much flexibility with regard to absences give the short timeframe. We suggest 2-3 additional absences beyond your own policy, but this depends on the nature of your class and assignments and does not apply when group work is due.

**Someone brought a dog to class today, how do I know if it is a service animal and should this go through the Office of Disability Services?**

**Service/Support Animals:** Service animals must be allowed in classes and students do not have to register their animal with Disability Services. A service animal is considered an assistive aid, like a wheelchair, so it is not an accommodation that needs to be approved. However, please inform Disability Services if someone brings an animal to class, so that we can keep track and avoid conflict with students with serious allergies, etc. Service animals must be on a leash at all times. They do not need to be wearing a special vest. They must be under control at all times and not disruptive. If an animal is disruptive the owner can be asked to remove the animal from the classroom, but you should ask if the person needs other assistance to rejoin the class. If a student comes to class with a dog, faculty may ask the individual to step outside and inquire as to whether the animal is a service animal. Legally, we are only allowed to ask two questions:
1. Is this a service animal that performs a task for someone with a disability?
2. What types of tasks does the animal perform?

If the student indicates that the animal is for emotional support, comfort, or safety and does not perform a task, it is a Support Animal and is not allowed in class without permission of Disability Services as a reasonable accommodation. As long as the animal is not disruptive it probably makes sense to let them stay for the class unless someone speaks up who has a serious allergy. Write to the student after class and to the Office of Disability services asking them to contact us before bringing the animal again to class. The professor can also ask the individual to remove the animal from class and come back, if it is disruptive.

*When do we allow technology in the classroom?*

**Technology in the Classroom:** Students with disabilities who require technology must be allowed to have their technology in the classroom. We recommend an open policy for classroom use of technology allowing all students to use technology responsibly in the classroom for note taking, research, and other educational purposes as appropriate to each class. Professors may consider asking all students to sign a responsible use agreement to address concerns about confidentiality of protected materials (e.g., de-identified case studies) and distribution of information beyond approved uses.

**Questions or thoughts about any of the information in this document can be directed to:**

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