GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY®

Let's Support Our Students
A Faculty and Staff Resource Guide

No. 2 in a Series

Access, Equity, and Inclusion for Students with Disabilities

Key Terms and Concepts

Disability

According to the World Health Organization, "Disability results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and depression, with personal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support."

Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity includes all of us. We are all neurodiverse as a human race because our minds and brain functioning are unique to us. Under the umbrella of neurodiversity, individuals may identify as neurodivergent (i.e., divergent brain/mind). Examples of neurodivergences include Autism Spectrum Disorder and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.

Accessibility

When something is accessible, it is usable to all people regardless of disability. In other words, accessibility of spaces and programs means that people with disabilities are afforded the same opportunity to (a) acquire the same information; (b) engage in the same interactions; and (c) enjoy the same services as a person without a disability. Accessibility can be achieved through either inclusive design or reactive accommodations (among other measures—access goes beyond accommodations).

Key Terms and Concepts

Accomodation

Accommodations are created in response to barriers in an environment. They are alterations or modifications to a service, program, or space that temporarily mitigate a disability-related barrier and facilitate access. Through proactive, inclusive design, the need for individualized accommodations may be minimized.

Faculty Guide
Includes strategies for inclusive teaching and FAQs about Disability Services

Faculty Accessibility Guide
Helps in the accessible development of courses and course materials

Accommodations in a Virtual Environment
Teaches how to implement accommodations and ensure accessibility in virtual courses

The Law

The **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990** and **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973** ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. These laws prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities and ensure equal access to university programs and activities. To facilitate equal access, colleges and universities are required to provide reasonable accommodations to all otherwise qualified students with disabilities.

While Disability Services works to promote and ensure equal access with regard to both the spirit and the letter of these laws, everyone at the university is responsible for access. Faculty and staff, for example, are required to honor all accommodations that Disability Services has approved for students with disabilities.

It is important to note, however, that although the law must be followed, it is not enough with regard to disability access and inclusion. Mason is committed to the principles of the social model of disability and means of proactively creating accessible and inclusive environments.

This guidebook serves as a starting point to understanding measures of going beyond the mandates of federal law to create truly inclusive experiences for students with disabilities.

George Mason's Policies

Our policies articulate the values and principles that the institution upholds, and the responsibilities of members of the university community with regard to disability access, equity, and inclusion.

Policy 1201

Non-Discrimination: George Mason is committed to providing equal opportunity and an educational and work environment free from any discrimination. The university is dedicated to ensuring access, fairness, and equity for minorities, women, individuals with disabilities, and veterans in its educational programs, related activities, and employment.

Policy 1203

Reasonable Accommodations: George Mason is committed to providing equal access to employment and educational opportunities for persons with disabilities. George Mason University recognizes that individuals with disabilities may need reasonable accommodations to have equally effective opportunities to participate in or benefit from university educational programs, services, and activities, as well as equal employment opportunities.

Policy 1308

Information and Communications Technology Accessibility: George Mason is committed to maintaining a diverse and inclusive academic community, where all students are afforded the opportunity for a transformational learning experience. This commitment must and does include individuals with disabilities.

Example Accommodations

When access is not achieved through design, accommodations facilitate accessible educational experiences. They do not change the expectations for learning, reduce the requirements of the task, or change what the student is required to learn. If a student would like to use their approved accommodations, they will provide you with an Academic Accommodation Letter; once you receive this letter, you must follow the accommodations determined to be reasonable by [Disability Services.](#) Reach out to Disability Services with any questions about accommodations.

Point of Reflection

Review the list of common accommodations and consider what measures of inclusive design could mitigate the need for these accommodations.

- Reduced distraction setting for exams
- Access to class presentations
- Audio recording class lectures
- Alternative textbook formats

- Sign language interpreting
- Extended time for exams
- Extended time on assignments
- Access to breaks during class
- Reduced course load

Accessibility Statement

Faculty are required to include an accessibility statement on all syllabi that contains contact information for Disability Services. The inclusion of an accessibility statement is not just to inform students of university resources around access, but also to welcome discussion about encountered classroom barriers and ways to maximize access.

Visit the **Disability Services website** for the two syllabus statement options that are available. Students may initiate accommodations at any point in the semester.

SECTION 2:
BEYOND ACCESS: EQUITY & INCLUSION

Key Terms and Concepts

Equity

It is important to understand that access does not equal equity. Equity refers to accessibility that is individualized and attentive to broader, systemic barriers to access. In other words, equitable access is achieved when a program, space, or service is designed to be as inclusive as possible.

Inclusion

Inclusion is both an act and a goal. As an act, inclusion is intentionally creating spaces that are welcoming and accessible for people with disabilities, true to the understanding that disability is considered a part of diversity. As a goal, inclusion in higher education includes:

- A barrier-free environment
- Feeling a sense of belonging as a person with a disability
- Proactive, seamless accessibility
- No stigma around being disabled or having a disability

What is a Barrier?

The World Health Organization describes barriers as being more than just physical. Rather, they are any "factors in a person's environment that, through their absence or presence, limit functioning and create disability."
These may include:

- Negative attitudes, perceptions, or biases around disability
- Deficit-based disability stigma
- Inaccessible means of communication (e.g., jargon, missing alt. text)
- Lack of knowledge of accessible practices

Examples of barriers

- Faculty misconceptions of disability or denying accommodations
- Inaccessible course materials
- Lack of students' knowledge of available resources
- Stigma among faculty, staff, and peers

Point of Reflection

- Because of barriers, students with disabilities are the only identity group who must cyclically request access to spaces and activities in higher education

Removing Barriers

Creating Equitable Access

- Implement approved accommodations
- Incorporate Universal Design for learning principles into course design and consider ways to minimize the need for individual accommodations
- Create opportunities for students to give feedback on accessibility
- Work with the Assistive Technology Initiative to ensure the digital accessibility of course content

Learn More

- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for optimizing teaching approaches to meet the needs of all learners proactively
- Visit **www.cast.org** for details and tips on using UDL in the classroom

Ensuring Inclusion

Disability bias exists. We all bring something to the table around disability (personal and family experiences with disability, media portrayals, etc.).

It is important to recognize this and engage in self-scrutiny to understand our biases, unlearn them, and ensure we do not engage in decision-making through them or allow them to guide our interactions with students.

SECTION 2: EQUITY & INCLUSION

The **Assistive Technology Initiative (ATI)** is committed to ensuring all members of the Mason community are provided with equivalent access to all information and communications technology (ICT) resources on Mason campuses. ATI provides direct assistive technology assessment, training, and support services to individuals with disabilities who require immediate technology solutions. It also work closely with Mason's campus strategic partners to develop and implement a broad, comprehensive ICT accessibility plan.

Assistive Technology Resources

Web Accessibility Standards

Request ATI Services

Report a Barrier

Upcoming Workshops

SECTION 2: EQUITY & INCLUSION

Other Strategies for Inclusion

The language we use can have a significant impact on others, specifically the language we choose to use when talking about disability. Some people prefer person-first language (e.g., "student with a disability") while others prefer to use identity-first language (e.g., "disabled"). Identity-first language is sometimes used to demonstrate how structures and systems disable an individual who has an impairment, while others use it to reclaim their disability identity.

For Your Consideration: How do you represent disability in language?

Do you represent it as an aspect of the human experience and a part of diversity? Or do you refer to it as something "special" or something people must "overcome?" Avoid the latter and embrace the idea that disability is part of diversity, and that barriers/environments are the problem, not the people themselves.

A good rule of thumb is to follow a person's lead in terms of how they prefer to identify and refer to their disability.

The Bottom Line

Treat students with respect.

Trust students as experts in their experiences.

Accessibility helps you and your students.

Disability is diversity.

Access does not equal inclusion.

Resources

This document is the second in a series of faculty and staff resources designed to help Mason's students. The first document, **Let's Help Our Students**, focuses on student mental health and well-being.

Mason has a variety of resources for additional information on disability access:

- Student access and accommodations: Disability Services

- Accessibility and technology solutions: Assistive Technology Initiative

- Access and inclusion in teaching: Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning

- Faculty access and accommodations: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

- Institutional diversity efforts: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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