Accessible Education: FAQs for Faculty

Q: What qualifies as a disability that requires accommodation?

According to the legal definition provided in Section 504 of the U.S. 1973 Rehabilitation Act, an “individual with a disability” is any person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Providing accommodations equalizes the opportunity for a student with a disability to participate in the program or activity. The Accessible Education Office will also work with students who have temporary impairments—such as broken limbs and concussions—that may affect them for limited periods of time to assess whether the student qualifies for reasonable accommodations on a temporary basis.

Q: What are accommodations?

Accommodations are anything that mitigates the effects of a person’s disability and removes a barrier to full participation. For example, someone who uses a wheelchair cannot gain access to a building without a ramp. In the same way, a person with dyslexia cannot gain access to the same textual information as their peers without extended time to read. Giving a student with dyslexia extended time to complete a reading is a reasonable accommodation to break down that particular barrier to participation. Other examples of academic accommodations include providing notes or a note taker, use of a computer, and testing in a separate location. A student may also require services such as document conversion and assistive technology, to name a few.

Q: Are accommodations a privilege or a right?

AUB participates in federal funding from the U.S. and therefore is required by the Office of Civil Rights and U.S. Department of Education legislation to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities. In addition, AUB’s own non-discrimination policy is in place to ensure that no student is discriminated against on the basis of disability and has meaningful access to all programs, services, and activities. Therefore, accommodations are a right, not a privilege.

Q: What about academic standards at AUB? If students can’t perform at the same level as their peers, shouldn’t they just go elsewhere?

All students who are accepted into AUB are to be given access to the same range of opportunities and programs. Making accommodations for students does not and should not mean that course expectations or standards are lowered. Accommodations are merely the provision of access; accommodations do NOT guarantee a student’s success. As AUB strives to foster an inclusive and welcoming community, we want to see the value in different abilities, divergent ways of thinking, and different approaches to doing the same task. We want to celebrate those differences and the benefits they bring to the community. See one example of those benefits here.
Q: My student claims to have a disability, but to me he/she doesn’t seem disabled at all. Does he/she really need accommodations?

Many disabilities such as learning disabilities, ADHD, or mental health conditions are not visible or readily apparent to an outside observer. All students who are requesting reasonable accommodations for a disability are required to submit documentation (a formal assessment by a relevant professional) that shows the impact of their disability on their learning. Check out this website for more information about hidden or invisible disabilities.

Q: Isn’t it unfair to the other students if I give accommodations to some students?

Accommodations are just removing a barrier for those students that the other students do not have. In that sense, it is actually leveling the playing field. In a study on comparing the effects of extended time testing on a group of university students with learning disabilities and without, the following results were found¹:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Standard Time</th>
<th>Extra Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LD (n=16)</td>
<td>13%ile</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-LD (n=15)</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This shows that, given extra time, the group without learning disabilities will not actually improve significantly whereas the group with learning disabilities will show significant improvement. As disability awareness rises on campus, students without disabilities will also be more understanding of the different needs of their peers.


Q: If I give the whole class extra time to complete an exam, doesn’t that fulfill the needs of a student with extended time as an accommodation?

No, extended time is relative to the actual amount of time the rest of the class received. So, if you are administering an hour-long exam but you end up giving the class two hours to complete it, a student in your class entitled to 50% extended time would be allowed a total of three hours for the same exam.

Q: What if I believe an accommodation listed in the Letter of Accommodations alters an essential element of my course? Do I have any recourse if I disagree with any of the recommended accommodations?

Yes, in these instances, you are encouraged to bring your concerns to the Accessible Education Office for discussion. It may be that a different accommodation would be better suited to your particular course and the AEO can help develop an alternative with which you agree.
Q: What if I have a large class and I don’t have the time to accommodate all these students?

If you plan your course with accommodations in mind, you will find it easier and less disruptive to implement them throughout the semester. By being creative and working collaboratively within departments, the resources and personnel necessary to meet student needs will become more apparent. Accessibility is the shared responsibility of the whole AUB community, so each person does not have to figure it out on their own. The Accessible Education Office is available to provide support and ideas as needed. See more on Universal Design Instruction here.

Q: Why do students with the same disability have different accommodations? Shouldn’t they need the same things?

Students with the same disability label can vary greatly in their particular abilities and needs for accommodation. One student may benefit from a certain accommodation while another may not. For example, one person with ADHD may not need a separate space to take an exam, whereas another might. This could be due to one being on medication and the other not, among other differences in the student’s skills, abilities, and coping strategies. That is why you will find the AUB Letter of Accommodations to be highly individualized.

Q: I have a student who is struggling in my class. What should I do to help him/her?

Talk privately with the student to discuss your observations and refer him/her to the various supports offered at AUB. If the student needs more learning supports or reveals that he/she has a disability, refer him/her to the Accessible Education Office. If he/she is not aware of any particular difficulties, he/she may still be referred to the AEO for an intake appointment. If the student reveals mental health issues or personal crises, refer him/her to the Counseling Center. The AEO and the Counseling Center work closely together, so as long as the student makes it to either entity, he/she will get connected with the appropriate supports.

Q: Why doesn’t the AUB Letter of Accommodations tell me what disability my student has?

Due to confidentiality practices, it is left solely up to the student if he or she wants to share their particular disability label or diagnosis. The Letter of Accommodation is developed after the disability has been confirmed through specialized professionals and thorough documentation; therefore, the accommodations listed are based on the particular needs of that student.

Q: What if students are just trying to “take advantage of the system” to get accommodations even if they don’t need them?

Given our requirements for proper documentation and a clear procedure through which students obtain accommodations, students who just want to “take advantage” will have a very hard time doing so. At the same time of course, no system is completely flawless. AUB is of the opinion that, while there is the risk of an occasional person trying to “take advantage of the system,” it is our duty to serve those in the community who truly need accommodations.
Q: How do you know you’re not accommodating beyond what the student needs and making it too easy for them to succeed?

The accommodations process is dynamic and requires collaboration from all involved. While accommodations are recommended by specialized professionals in the field, it is not until the student is going through and actually making use of those accommodations that we can see whether or not they are too much or not enough. In addition, a student’s needs may change over time depending on the nature of their disability. Because of this, we rely heavily on monitoring the student’s progress and performance as well as hearing from the student. The AEO encourages students to be reflective and self-aware, and follows up on all cases to see if accommodations need to be adjusted in any way. Adjustment of accommodations can be initiated by student or professor. It is most common that students with disabilities are highly motivated to only use those accommodations that they actually need and are quick to say when they feel they do not need an accommodation.

Q: Don’t most people get diagnosed with disabilities when they are young? Why is this student just finding out?

In some cases, it may be that the student has had the disability since childhood (e.g., dyslexia), but their needs have changed over time or their documentation is outdated. Other disabilities (e.g., neurological or mental health conditions) develop in early adulthood. It is not uncommon for high-performing students to be identified with a learning disability at the college level. Often, the compensatory strategies used at the secondary level are no longer adequate for therigors of college. In addition, the anxieties and stressors that come with transitioning to college can exacerbate an already existing problem.