

Disability Services Faculty Guide

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University Life
DISABILITY SERVICES
George Mason University®

Introduction

This guide was created to provide faculty guidance for teaching students with disabilities. It outlines the laws that shape accessibility, the processes used by Disability Services, and the responsibilities of students, faculty, and the university.

While federal law requires institutions to provide reasonable accommodations, [George Mason's commitment](#) goes further: to create learning environments where all students have an equitable opportunity to succeed. Faculty play a vital role in making this possible.

Disability Services is here to support you. If you are ever unsure about how to apply an accommodation or how to respond to a situation, please reach out at 703-993-2474 or ods@gmu.edu.



Note on Multiple Campuses



Disability Services supports students across all George Mason campuses. While many processes (e.g., use of the Testing Center or [Assistive Technology Initiative](#)) are centered on Fairfax, equivalent accommodations must be implemented for students enrolled at SciTech, Mason Square, or other sites.

Faculty should consult Disability Services for guidance on coordinating accommodations outside of Fairfax.

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PART ONE: BACKGROUND

Legal Framework

Several key laws ensure equal access to higher education for students with disabilities.



The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990; ADA Amendments Act, 2008): Prohibits discrimination and requires equal access across public services, employment, education, and other contexts.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973:
Prohibits discrimination by any institution receiving federal funds, including universities. It guarantees that qualified students with disabilities have an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from academic programs.



The Fair Housing Act and Virginia State Laws:
Provide additional protections related to housing and accessibility.

Together, these laws require that universities provide reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities as long as the accommodations do not fundamentally alter essential course or program requirements. Accommodations apply to academics, housing, and campus activities.

DISABILITY SERVICES PROCESS

Students with disabilities must connect with Disability Services (DS) to access accommodations. The process involves:

01

Self-Identification and Documentation: Students submit a Student Self-Identification Form and relevant documentation describing their disability and functional limitations.

02

Interactive Meeting: The student collaborates with a DS specialist to review documentation and discuss barriers they face. Accommodations are determined through this collaborative process.

03

Academic Accommodation Letter: DS issues an Academic Accommodation Letter or reaches out to the relevant department outlining the student's approved accommodations.

04

Delivery to Faculty: The student delivers Academic Accommodation Letters to their instructors. Accommodations take effect only once the letter has been provided.

05

Implementation and Dialogue: Faculty and students discuss how accommodations will be applied in each course. DS staff are available to facilitate these conversations if needed.



IMPORTANT REMINDERS



Accommodations are not retroactive; they begin once faculty receive the Academic Accommodation Letter.

Recommendations from healthcare providers are not automatically binding; all accommodations must be approved by DS.

If an accommodation appears to interfere with the essential requirements of a course, contact DS immediately.

Students have the right to (a) a grievance process for concerns about approved accommodations and (b) may file a complaint with the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) regarding their implementation

CONFIDENTIALITY AND DISCLOSURE

Students with disabilities are admitted to George Mason under the same standards as other students. They are not required to disclose their disability during admission or at any point afterward unless they seek accommodations.

When students share documentation, it is kept confidential by DS and is not part of their academic record. Faculty will only receive the Academic Accommodation Letter, which outlines accommodations but does not disclose diagnoses.

Faculty must:

- Maintain confidentiality and never request diagnostic details.
- Handle accommodations discreetly.
- Avoid public discussion of a student's disability.



Students may choose to disclose additional information, but this is voluntary.

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Ensuring equal access requires shared responsibility among students, faculty, and the university.



STUDENTS' RIGHTS & RESPONSIBILITIES

Students with disabilities at Mason are entitled to reasonable accommodations, equitable access to programs and services, confidentiality, and respectful treatment.

To receive accommodations, students must engage with Disability Services (DS), provide appropriate documentation, request and distribute Academic Accommodation Letters (AALs) each semester, and allow adequate time for implementation. Because accommodations are not retroactive, students are expected to be proactive in communicating their needs and collaborating with faculty and DS to ensure access.

FACULTY RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Faculty have the right to:

- Receive notification in writing from DS of a student's need for accommodation.
- Contact DS to clarify student requests for accommodation, academic adjustments, and/or auxiliary aids.

Faculty and staff do not have the right to access confidential disability documentation.



Faculty at George Mason have the responsibility to:

- Include accommodation procedures in all course syllabi
- Refer students who disclose disabilities to DS
- Implement Accommodations on the Academic Accommodation Letter
- Ensure course content is accessible: Captioned videos, Web-accessible materials
- Maintain confidentiality
- Understand that accessibility is the role of everyone at the University

PART TWO: ACCOMMODATIONS IN PRACTICE

Accommodations are designed to remove barriers while preserving the integrity of course outcomes. They are not modifications of essential requirements, but rather adjustments that ensure equal access. Some common accommodations include:

- **Extended Time for Tests, Exams, and Quizzes:** Students may receive additional time beyond standard exam time. This allows for processing differences, anxiety management, or the need for assistive technology.
- **Reduced-Distraction Testing Environment:** Students may take exams in a quiet, limited distraction space.
- **Audio Recording Lectures:** This may include the use of personal recording devices, smart pens, or approved software to capture lecture content for later review. Recordings are for the student's personal academic use only.

- **Alternative Formats:** Materials may be provided in digital, large-print, Braille, or audio format depending on student needs.
- **Assistive Technology:** Use of screen readers, speech-to-text, or other devices to access course content and complete assignments.
- **Flexibility with Attendance or Deadlines:** In some cases, students with chronic health or mental health conditions may need limited flexibility, provided essential course requirements remain intact.
- **Accessible Classroom Spaces:** Furniture adjustments, preferential seating, or room relocation may be necessary.

Faculty should not attempt to evaluate or approve accommodations independently. If a student requests disability-related adjustments not listed in their Academic Accommodation Letter, refer them back to DS.

ACCOMMODATIONS AND EXAMS

Faculty are responsible for implementing approved accommodations in their courses. While Disability Services provides guidance and support, instructors carry the primary responsibility for ensuring accommodations are provided. This includes testing accommodations, which should be implemented within the department whenever possible. The Disability Services Testing Center (DSTC) is available as a backup resource if faculty are unable to provide the approved accommodations in their own course setting.

To ensure timely and equitable access, faculty should:

1. Review the Academic Accommodation Letter early to anticipate and plan for any necessary adjustments.
2. Provide approved testing accommodations within the department whenever feasible.
3. Coordinate with the DSTC only if accommodations cannot be provided in the department. When using the DSTC, exams must be submitted in advance, and faculty must indicate instructions such as time limits, permitted materials, and delivery/return method.
4. Protect exam integrity by applying the same academic standards and expectations as for all students.

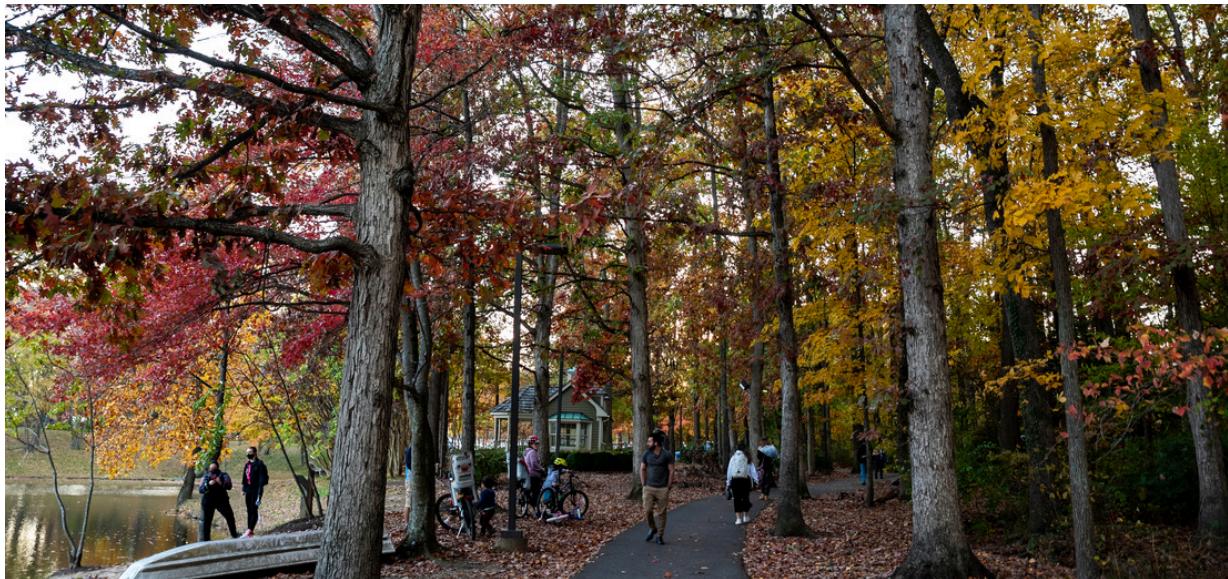


While the DSTC is located on the Fairfax campus, faculty at SciTech, Mason Square, and other instructional sites should work with their departments to provide accommodations on-site whenever feasible. If support is needed, DS can help coordinate options across campuses.

For more information on the Disability Services Testing Center, visit [our website](#).

ATTENDANCE AND ASSIGNMENT FLEXIBILITY

Some students experience conditions that occasionally interfere with class attendance or assignment deadlines. DS may approve flexibility accommodations after a careful assessment of the disability-related impact and course expectations.



Faculty should:

- Collaborate with students to establish a plan for making up missed work and communicating absences.
- If absences begin to conflict with essential course requirements, faculty should contact DS promptly.
- Students are not required to seek permission to use this accommodation and cannot be penalized for absences. For more information, review our [policies and procedures](#).

ONLINE AND HYBRID COURSES

Accommodations extend to all learning environments, including fully online and hybrid courses. Faculty are responsible for ensuring that course content and delivery meet accessibility requirements under the ADA. This means proactively considering accessibility when designing courses and selecting instructional materials. At a minimum, faculty should:

- Ensure course platforms and instructional tools (e.g., Canvas, publisher sites, software) are compatible with screen readers and other assistive technologies.
- Provide captions and transcripts for all video and audio content. Auto-generated captions should be reviewed and edited for accuracy.
- Use accessible documents and materials, including properly formatted Word, PDF, and PowerPoint files.
- Offer accessible alternatives if a required tool, activity, or resource cannot be used with assistive technology.
- Design assessments with accessibility in mind, ensuring quizzes and assignments can be navigated with assistive technology.



Faculty can contact the Assistive Technology Initiative (ATI) for training, resources, and individualized support in reviewing course content for accessibility.

INCLUSIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES

The following strategies apply across many types of disabilities and can help create a more inclusive classroom for all students.

Provide Accessible Materials

- Share slides, notes, and readings in advance whenever possible.
- Ensure digital content is screen-reader compatible and videos are captioned.

Communicate Clearly

- Give instructions both verbally and in writing.
- Break down complex tasks into smaller steps with deadlines.
- Use plain, concise language.

Support Flexible Participation

- Offer options for participation (e.g., written, verbal, online).
- Allow brief breaks during long classes.
- Be open to alternative formats when group work or presentations are required.

Build Structure and Predictability

- Maintain consistent routines.
- Provide clear grading rubrics and assignment guidelines.
- Send reminders for upcoming deadlines.



Allow for Time and Processing Needs

- Pause after asking questions to allow processing.
- Encourage students to use assistive technology as needed.

Address Physical and Sensory Access

- Ensure classrooms are accessible (aisles, seating, entrances).
- Be mindful of lighting, noise, and other sensory factors.
- Anticipate access needs for labs, fieldwork, or trips.

Respond with Flexibility

- Allow reasonable adjustments to attendance or deadlines when health or disability needs arise.
- Coordinate with DS if a student's condition significantly impacts course requirements.

Maintain a Respectful, Inclusive Environment

- Protect confidentiality.
- Apply conduct expectations fairly to all students.
- Show openness and respect when students discuss needs or challenges.



These strategies are meant as starting points. Every student is unique. The Academic Accommodation Letter outlines required adjustments, but faculty can also use these practices to create a more inclusive classroom for all learners. When in doubt, collaborate with DS to ensure student needs are met while maintaining academic integrity.

PART THREE: MANAGING BEHAVIORS

Faculty occasionally encounter students whose behaviors—whether related to a disability or not—disrupt learning. Disability-related behavior does not exempt students from the George Mason Code of Student Conduct, but understanding best practices can help maintain a supportive and productive classroom.

- **Set clear expectations at the start of the semester.** Share classroom policies and expectations with all students early, which helps establish a consistent framework for addressing behavior and reduces the chance of misunderstandings later.
- **Distinguish between disability-related needs and misconduct.** Some behaviors (e.g., leaving the room frequently, using assistive devices) are legitimate accommodations. Others (e.g., harassment, threats, repeated disruption) are not acceptable.
- **Address issues early and privately.** Speak with the student calmly and describe the specific behavior rather than making assumptions about intent.
- **Consult DS.** If you suspect a behavior may be connected to a disability, reach out for guidance. DS can help clarify whether accommodations apply and suggest strategies.
- **Prioritize safety.** If a student's behavior raises immediate safety concerns, follow standard campus protocols by contacting University Police.



STRATEGIES FOR COMMON SCENARIOS

- Frequent Interruptions or Talking Out of Turn
 - Redirect respectfully in class.
 - Follow up privately to clarify expectations.
 - Consider whether flexible participation options may help (e.g., writing down questions)
- Difficulty with Group Work
 - Offer structured roles or options for individual contributions.
 - Set clear expectations and timelines.
- Emotional Distress or Anxiety Episodes
 - Allow brief breaks if possible.
 - Acknowledge the student privately and suggest DS or Counseling and Psychological Services as resources.
- Aggressive or Threatening Conduct
 - End the interaction immediately.
 - Contact University Police if safety is at risk.
 - Report the incident through the appropriate university channels.

Key: Faculty are not expected to diagnose or manage disability-related behavior alone. DS, [Counseling and Psychological Services](#), [Student Support and Advocacy Center](#), and [University Police](#) are all available partners. When in doubt, consult first, act with care, and document what occurred.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Creating an inclusive and accessible learning environment is a shared responsibility between faculty, students, and Disability Services. While Disability Services provides guidance, resources, and support, the role of faculty is central in ensuring students with disabilities have equitable access to their education.

By reviewing Academic Accommodation Letters early, planning ahead for adjustments, communicating expectations clearly, and reaching out to Disability Services when questions arise, instructors can make a significant impact on student success. Accommodations are not about giving students an advantage—they are about removing barriers so all students have the opportunity to meet the same academic standards.

We encourage faculty to view accessibility not only as a legal obligation, but as a commitment to equity, inclusion, and academic excellence. When faculty and Disability Services collaborate proactively, the result is a stronger, more supportive learning environment for all students.



CONCLUSION

Final Reminders

- Review Academic Accommodation Letters as soon as you receive them.
- Implement approved accommodations directly within your course whenever possible.
- Use the Disability Services Testing Center only as a backup when in-class accommodations cannot be provided.
- Set expectations early in the semester with the entire class.
- Reach out to Disability Services promptly with any questions or concerns.
- Remember: accommodations are about equity, not advantage.

Additional Support

- [Faculty Resources](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions](#)

For direct consultation or support, contact Disability Services:
ods@gmu.edu | 703-993-2474



**Thank you for
your partnership
in advancing
Mason's
commitment to
equity and
access.**