

The ADA Syllabus Statement Discussion and

It's the first day of class, and if you are a faculty member like me, you are in the middle of that often-repeated ritual of explaining the syllabus. While your students shift in their seats, trying to resist the urge to text, check Instagram, or whatever furtive phone activities they might want to perform, you diligently and carefully explain the course requirements, the course policies, the schedule, etc. And at some point, you will get to the section on disability accommodations. Many colleges and universities have boilerplate passages that faculty use: the college affirms its commitment to complying with the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), and students are directed to an office of disability services, which will help coordinate "reasonable accommodations" for "documented disabilities." And many statements also stress that it is the student's responsibility to provide faculty with accommodations forms and information. All of this is well and good. But I want to argue here for going off script and engaging in a more historically-contextualized class discussion of disability accommodations. It will benefit you and it will benefit your students. Here's how and why.



The "Capitol Crawl": From Individual to Collective

In 1990, disability rights activists gathered at the National Mall in Washington, DC, slipped out of their wheelchairs, dropped their crutches, and dragged themselves up the 83 steps of the U.S. Capitol building. The "Capital Crawl" demonstration was designed to illustrate – both literally and figuratively – the barriers that people with disabilities confront and to push for better access to political and public spheres. The subsequent ADA legislation is one of the major civil rights achievements of our time, and this rich history of disability activism has a direct connection to the accommodations we make in higher education. Talking about the ADA as a civil rights issue in your classroom – and it can be as simple as briefly mentioning this history – shifts the discussion of accommodations in important ways for students.

First, **it puts disability in a larger social and political context**, and secondly, it **shifts attention away from individual students**. This is significant because there are elements of the process of accessing disability services that are potentially stigmatizing for students with disabilities. For example, it is common for a student with a disability to be required to approach every faculty in each class every semester to discuss accommodations and to pass along paperwork. It is of course good for students to be responsible and to take charge of their learning. But at the same time, the process of having to continually ask for services, to self-identify as disabled, can be tedious at best. To be disabled is to occupy a stigmatized identity category, as the language of the ADA itself acknowledges. Some students, and in particular incoming freshmen who used disability services in high school, might want to leave that identity behind.

Accommodations As Integral to an Inclusive Classroom

But as faculty, that's exactly what you don't want. You want your students to learn. You don't want a student to struggle unnecessarily, especially when a simple accommodation like a distraction-free test environment or a recording device for lectures would have made the difference between success and failure. You want to create the conditions in which accommodations are viewed not as inconveniences but as integral parts of an inclusive classroom, an environment where our diverse bodies and minds are valued for their differences. This benefits you, and all of your students. And it reflects the true spirit behind the Americans with Disabilities Act, which is much more than legal filler on a syllabus.

Resources

NYIT Office of Accessibility Services. Retrieved from

http://www.nyit.edu/health_and_wellness/disability/

Funckes, C., et al. Syllabus Statement. *Refocus: Viewing the Work of Disability Services Differently*. Retrieved from <http://www.projectshift-refocus.org/syllabus.htm>

Nielsen, K. E. (2013). *A Disability History of the United States*. Boston: Beacon P.

Mayerson, A. (1992). The History of the Americans with Disabilities Act: A Movement Perspective. *Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund*. Retrieved from

<http://dredf.org/news/publications/the-history-of-the-ada/>

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