

ACCOMMODATING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

There isn't a playbook to consult *when a student requests accommodations* in accordance with the landmark 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act. What creates a level playing field for all who desire to attend law school *is as individual as a coach's approach to game day.*



“There is no cookie cutter solution,” explained Lynette Petty, ’87, associate professor of law and assistant dean for accommodations. “Each person’s experience with a disability is different.” She offered the example of two sight-impaired students using different technologies to meet their individual needs. One uses a software program that magnifies the text on a computer monitor while another student uses software that reads the text aloud.

Petty, who has been responsible for ADA accommodations at Washburn Law for 12 years, relies on medical documentation and recommendations from the student’s health care provider to help her finalize the requirements for those who have requested assistance. “It’s not like a computer where you can put in a card and it spits out information. I’m making the final decision based on the recommendations of the physician combined with the demands of the law school program.”

Requesting assistance is a personal choice for students, and many have been able to self-accommodate up until the point of attending law school. Here, Petty said, the demands of the law school curricula and the critical thinking skills required to succeed prompt students to request accommodations they previously did not

need. “The demands of learning in a different way and applying those skills in the classroom are much different from undergraduate work.” Sometimes students try to go it alone the first semester but then realize they need assistance to compete on the same level as the other students.”

Providing a level playing field to meet ADA requirements commands a team-oriented approach. From faculty and library technology staff to support staff and service providers, each plays an important role in ensuring a student’s accommodations are as seamless as possible and can be adjusted on a moment’s notice.

“I’ve been doing this for many years and never once have I had faculty or staff reluctant to assist,” Petty said. “Our library technology staff is incredible. They are always willing to help at the last minute and always willing to troubleshoot,” she added.

Once Petty finalizes the accessibility needs of a student, she hands off the information to Donna Haverkamp, student records administrator, Dean’s office, who is responsible for finding testing rooms and proctors. She also works with professors to ensure students’ testing needs

are met. “Donna is amazing!” Petty remarked.

Haverkamp’s penchant for organization fits well with the demands of keeping exam rooms, times, names and needs on track. As soon as she receives the list of students who require accommodations, she prints their class schedules and sets up a spreadsheet listing each student’s classes and exam dates. She works closely with Kerri Pelton, Clinic office assistant, to ensure exams are adapted to meet the needs of the students with disabilities. Haverkamp’s dedication to this aspect of her work is palpable. “You really get to know the students and understand them. It makes you more aware of disabilities that people face in life, the obstacles that others face day to day—the same things we take for granted,” she said.

Barbara Ginzburg, Electronic Services librarian, is one of the first contacts to help with assistive technologies for the hearing and vision impaired in the classroom.



She said she meets with students the first day of class or orientation week when they can test equipment and ensure “everyone is on the same page.” Ginzburg reiterated how the individual needs of a student combined with the course demands dictate what will be required in a specific classroom for a specific student. “Each student’s needs are very individualized,” she said.

Ginzburg sometimes has relied on Internet chat to receive instant feedback from a student experiencing technical difficulties in class. She was available at a moment’s notice to assist when equipment failed or compatibility issues created a problem. “I would keep open the chat window so the student could communicate with me while in class in case something wasn’t working,” she said.

Heidi Benham, an interpreter since 2001, interprets for a Washburn law student and appreciates the accessibility of staff when a problem arises. When Benham’s student signed to her in class that his equipment was not working, she immediately sent Ginzburg an e-mail, but wasn’t sure the problem could be fixed before class ended. “She shows up about 45 seconds later with a new computer. Done. We were ready to go,” Benham explained.

“By far, this has been the most accessible place; everyone here is so friendly and helpful,” Benham said. “Other places I’ve worked don’t have a point person, but here I can call Barb.”

Ginzburg said staff teamwork is the key to providing students with assistance they need. “As much as we can, we try to create an environment without disadvantages. It’s very much a team effort with the library staff to troubleshoot issues. Nancy, Jewel and Curtis—everyone plays a role.” Nancy Gray is circulation librarian; Jewel Brueggeman-Makda is student computer services coordinator; and Curtis Von Lintel is head of information technology in the Washburn Law Library. **Glen McBeth, ’03**, instructional technology librarian, also lends his expertise.

Accessibility for students also requires collaboration with professors and teaching staff. Special equipment that translates spoken words to closed captioning or amplifies spoken words to an earpiece requires Professor **Jeffrey Jackson, ’92**, to be wired with two microphones in his Legal Analysis, Research, and Writing course. Jackson stressed that doing so is simply routine. “The students are the most important part of what we do. It’s not that big of a deal.”

“For me, the tech side is transparent, thanks to our technology and accommodations staff. The only thing I’ve had to deal with is wearing mics, which, again, is no big deal.” Jackson also e-mails the students any examples he plans to use the next day in class to ensure there is appropriate time for interpretation. “Most of it is the student willing to do the hard work.” Jackson said.

For one student, interactive citation software used on laptops in class doesn’t always work well with his equipment. Teaching assistant Will Paulson, second-year law student, translates the ICW (Interactive Citation Workstation) information into a Word document for a student because the student’s JAWS (Job Access with Speech) screen reader can’t always read the ICW text.

“The student knows he can always come to me with questions or for help,” Paulson said.

Jackson was quick to note that creating a level playing field requires nothing more than understanding that what we do at Washburn Law is what’s best for students.

“They (the students) make it easy for us—they are the ones going the extra yard.”