

The Professional's Guide to Exploring and Facilitating Access

Many disability resource professionals have used AHEAD's 2012 Documentation Guidance to assist them in modifying their documentation practices to be more responsive to the broader definition of disability put forward in the ADA as amended. However, since AHEAD recommends a flexible process rather than providing a standard list of documentation characteristics, implementing the Guidance can be challenging. The intentionally fluid and individual approach described requires professional judgment and the ability to listen, question, trust, reflect and analyze.

The following seven steps, are offered as a guide for maximizing the wealth of information that can be discovered during conversations with students, processing it, and determining whether it is adequate to respond to a student's request for accommodation. Depending on the student's experiences and fluency and the disability professional's knowledge and observations, there may be no or limited need for external documentation following a complete student interview.

7 Step Guidance on Utilizing the Student Conversation as an Effective Resource

1. Listen to the student's story (or read if an email conversation).

- Based on conversation, determine...
 - Why has the student contacted the office in the first place?
 - What barriers to access has the student described?
 - What is the student requesting?
- Questions to assist in developing the story and in learning about the barriers present:
 - What brought you here today?
 - What environments create barriers/challenges for you? What barriers/challenges in the classroom or otherwise are you experiencing currently?
 - How does X experience impact you?
 - What type of classroom environment do you prefer?
 - What solutions have worked in the past?
 - What solutions might work in this situation based on your assessment?
 - How is X class designed? How are you graded?
 - What kind of exams or assessments work well for you?
 - What is it about Y test (class, paper, etc.) that meant you didn't need accommodations for it?
 - What types of assignments do you enjoy? What types of assignments challenge you?
 - What is your experience when reading (focus, comprehension, etc.)?
 - How is the housing experience going?
 - What accommodations did you use in high school?

- When a student does not indicate a specific condition or impairment in conversation or in answer to the above questions, you may need to explore more specifically to understand whether the situation is related to an underlying disability. While that exploration will likely result from questions that flow naturally from the conversation, the following may be helpful:
 - I understand the barrier /challenge you've described, but wonder if you can tell me more about why you think X situation may be a problem for you but not for other students?
 - You've described the barrier clearly but have not mentioned a disability/impairment/underlying condition. Can you tell me more about that?

2. Initial professional observations?

- Does a disability-related barrier exist?
- Is there a clear connection between the barrier and the student's condition?
- What makes sense based on your conversation with the student?
- Did the student provide any external documentation that is helpful? Is it consistent with the student's report and your observations?
- Is anything not adding up for you at the moment? Start to recognize any gaps in your understanding of the situation.
- Are there factors the student may not have mentioned that could have an impact on the situation, such as the impact of pain or medication?
- Are there any red flags cycling through your internal filter?
- Do your concerns have to do with determining access or are you thinking about creating a success plan for the student? Keep in mind that accommodations are about access.

3. Any known environmental barriers, considerations, or fundamental components in play?

- What is the role of the environment in creating and/or maintaining the barrier?
- Is it immediately obvious that accommodations could create access based on the information provided?
- Is the requested accommodation clearly related to the student's disability but inappropriate in the context (such as a request for note-card on exams that test primarily measure recall)? Accommodations that undermine academic integrity are not reasonable regardless of a clear connection to the disability.
- Consider what might warrant additional consultation with others on campus.
- Is the requested accommodation likely to effectively remove the barrier for the student in that environment?

4. Any gaps between what the student requests, details in the environment and what you believe would create access?

- Put the story, initial observations, and environmental variables together.
- Can any adjustments in the environment be made, such as seeing if the professor would modify the course to remove the barrier without accommodations?
- Based on all information gathered, determine where reasonable accommodations can clearly create access (extended time on tests, computer for essay exams, note-takers, etc.) when environmental changes are not feasible.

- Does the student specifically seek something that does not make sense to you based on the information gathered? This is the gap that needs to be addressed...
 - Are there other questions that you can ask to get to this information?
 - Do you need to let the student know you need time to consider the request?
 - Can you talk to others on campus about the situation, including getting more information from faculty, housing, etc.?
 - Would a review of the student's academic transcript provide any beneficial information?
 - Could you experiment with certain accommodations (a modified response to intervention process) to see what impact it has on the barriers?

5. Your judgment and assessment matter!

- Trust your instincts and common sense abilities.
- Trust the student.
- How have similar situations been handled on your campus? What (good and bad) can be learned from past experiences?
- Do you not trust your ability to make a decision? If so, what is missing for you to have that trust?
- Is there anything you fear about making a decision in this case?
- Your judgment and assessment can be documented to support decisions made.

6. Use 3rd party documentation to fill gaps in understanding.

- Before requesting additional 3rd party documentation, ask yourself how it will assist in your decision-making.
 - Will it really be a difference-maker in the end?
 - What will it address that you cannot address within your office or in consultation with others on campus?
 - Why would you feel more confident making the decision with this additional information than without it?
- Request documentation that specifically fills in gaps that cannot be filled otherwise...gaps must be about access only, not treatment or success plans.
 - The requested information should clarify the connection between the condition and the environmental barrier for which accommodations are requested.

7. Student or disability office consults with course and department as necessary.

- What next steps does the student need to take?
- Does the disability office need to get involved with access outcomes in some way?
- Might the accommodation result in a fundamental alteration requiring that you consult with faculty, housing, etc. before making a decision?
- Keep the conversations going as necessary, including as changes evolve either with the person or within the environment.
- Identify the appropriate path of action based on the situation at hand.

Access: The Core Mission of the Disability Office

While the student interview is an important step in considering accommodations, disability professionals should always approach these conversations with a clear understanding that the goal of all accommodations is to create access. This requires a fundamental understanding of the two terms: “access” and “accommodation.”

Definition of Access -- An equitable opportunity to full participation resulting from either:

- An environment that is designed (proactively) to work for a majority of people; OR
- Effective, reasonable modifications to policies, practices, procedures and other environmental barriers (reactive) that result in access.

Using Accommodations as a Path to Access

Reasonable accommodations, such as the ones typically discussed in our field and communicated to faculty through “letters” of accommodation, are retrofits to inaccessibly designed environments put in place on an individual basis to create access. They are not the only course of action.

Access can be achieved through accommodations or when:

- An environment is proactively designed from the outset (such as all course videos including captions);
- Creative alternatives outside the norm are identified (such as when a professor agrees to facilitate access by giving a student a paper version of a test when all other students take the test online);
- The values, behaviors, beliefs, attitudes and/or level of awareness of others are shifted.

Disability professionals often need to facilitate creative solutions to the barriers that exist by learning about and analyzing environmental variables and working proactively to reframe notions of access for faculty and other campus personnel. While some accommodations may not be reasonable because they would fundamentally alter the nature of an academic experience, design modifications and shifts in attitudes can provide access while also removing stigma from students with disabilities and creating an improved experience for all.

Contributors Adam Meyer, University of Central Florida Melanie Thornton, University of Arkansas Carol Funckes, University of Arizona