



Requesting Academic Accommodations

by Sheila Graham, Ed.D., and Ronald L. English, M.Div.

DISCLOSURE AND SELF-ADVOCACY SKILLS are paramount to presenting the need for accommodation at the post-secondary level. If a student with disabilities has had opportunities to practice self-advocacy skills while still in the supervised sanctuary of high school, he or she will be more likely to carry these skills over to college. In a recent issue of *Disability Compliance for Higher Education*, research suggests that more students are knowledgeable about their needs and rights than in the past. Some of these students are better prepared and able to self-advocate. And, although some students do appear ready for the rigors of college life, many still come to college underprepared. Research has also indicated that parents do not seem to play an active role in transition planning and are often ill-prepared for their role of parenting a college-age student. In some cases, service providers are finding that parents have not received the support and infor-

mation they need to allow their children to be more independent (Block, 2000).

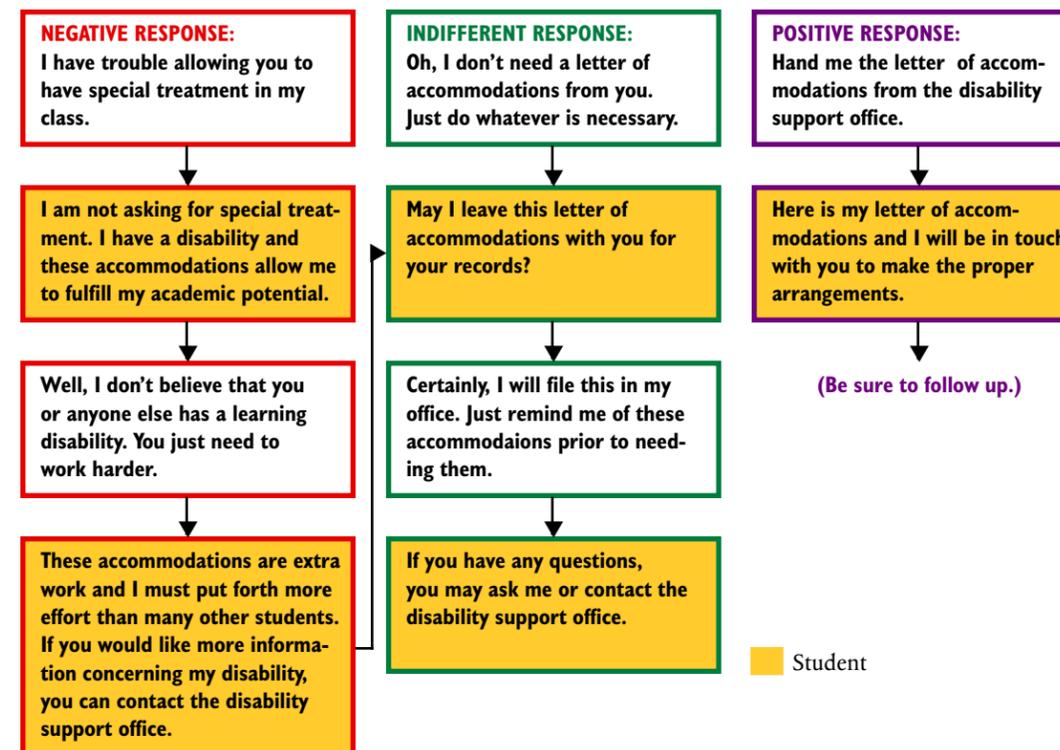
Even though a student may utilize self-advocacy skills, this does not necessarily increase acceptance by the university community. Quite often, non-acceptance is the result of confrontationally seeking accommodations or bringing a difficulty to a professor's attention without accommodation suggestions (Rendon, 1994). Implementation of self-advocacy strategies can be aided by disability support counselors who are well versed in disability law, learning approaches and communication skills (Parcel, 1993). Effective disclosure principles are essential for the student with disabilities. Competent disclosure and advocacy skills require shared information concerning disability-related needs; effective recommendations for accommodations; and coordinated procedures to alleviate making changes when efforts are not working (Lynch and Gussel, 1996).

Student and Instructor Postures Concerning Reasonable Accommodations

Attitudes	Negative Reactions	Indifferent Reactions	Positive Reactions
Attitudes toward accommodation requests	Accommodations are viewed as unfair advantages	Accommodations are afforded out of obligation	Accommodations are encouraged
Student's perception of instructor's reaction	The instructor is viewed as being an adversary who is unwilling to accommodate disabilities	The instructor is viewed by the student as being inconvenienced by the student's disability	The instructor is viewed by the student as a friend
Attitudes toward the disability support office	The instructor resists cooperation with the disability support office and students with disabilities	The instructor is aware of disability issues and the university's policy and procedures concerning these issues	The instructor encourages students to use the services of the disability support office

Student Initiative:

"I would like to talk to you about my learning disability and the accommodations I need in the class."



The primary responsibility for implementing accommodations falls on the shoulders of the student with disabilities and many are unprepared for this role. High school faculty and parents hinder students with disabilities when they do not allow them to speak and act for themselves. Intervention must take place at the high school level in order for students with disabilities to successfully advocate for themselves in college. Most of these students already know from experience what works best for them and with the help of the established policy and procedure of the disability support office, can relay learning skills to a professor. High school graduates with disabilities need practical instruction to carry the acceptance through into the college process, and once enrolled, they need support as they earn their education (Lynch and Gussel, 1996). These self-disclosure enhancement skills include timing, plan development, assertive communication, self-advocacy and adult cooperation (Siperstein, 1988).

Procrastination can lead to academic disaster. It is imperative that students with disabilities in the post-

secondary setting disclose their disabilities at the start of the semester when professors and support staff have ample time to arrange for needed accommodations. During a meeting with a professor, effective communication skills are essential. These skills include:

- Expressing thoughts and feelings honestly and directly;
- Making eye contact that is firm, but not glaring;
- Speaking appropriately in an audible voice;
- Using a speech pattern that is clear;
- Emphasizing key words;
- Using "I" language and not "you" language;
- Making appointments to raise issues; and
- Being aware of non-verbal presentation using body cues and postures (Thierfield, 1985).

When to Rehearse Self-advocacy Dialogue

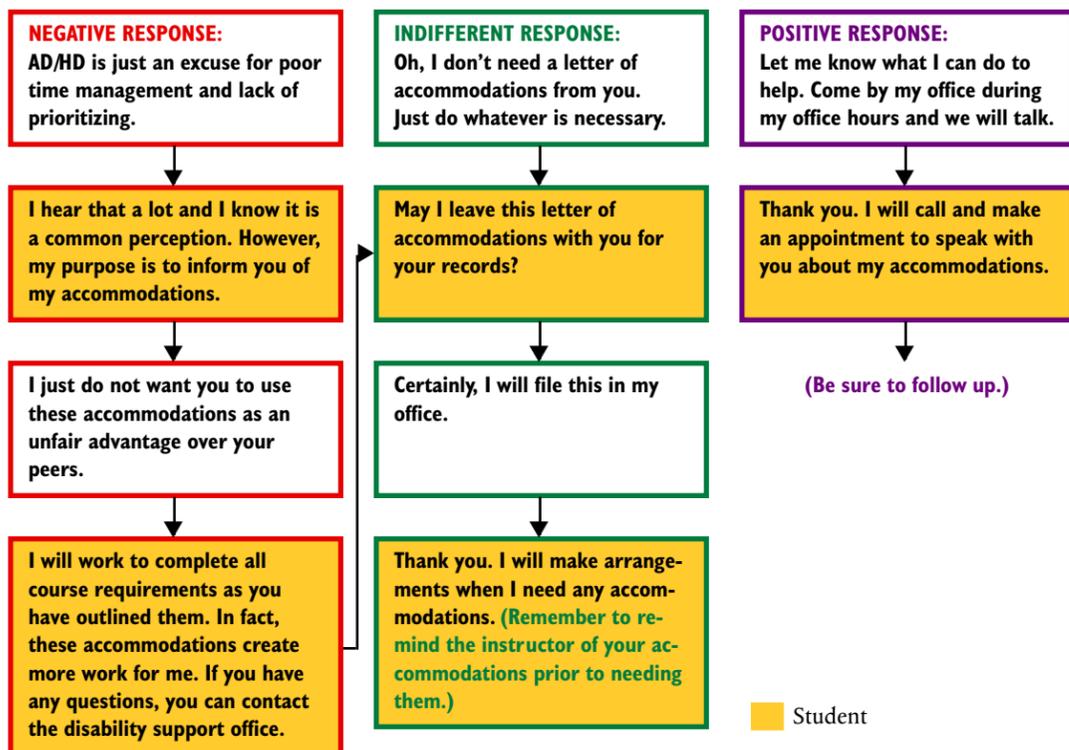
Being aware of communication skills and practicing them will help prime students with disabilities to become competent self-advocates. However, self-advocacy also includes the ability to discuss weaknesses as well as strengths, because students must be able to



Requesting Academic Accommodations

Student Initiative:

"I would like to talk to you about my AD/HD and the accommodations I need in the class."



exchange ideas concerning functional limitations in the specific setting of the post secondary institution. It is the student's responsibility, not the support counselor's, to self-disclose and arrange for accommodations (Lynch and Gussel, 1996). Once a student with disabilities discloses concerns and needs to a professor, an interactive process begins with feedback between the professor and the student, not the disability support office and professor. Unless feedback is a continuing process, the professor might assume that all needs are being met. Yet throughout this process, all participants need to avoid being confrontational, aggressive and rigid (Lynch and Gussel, 1996). Instructors in high school, as well as college, tend to have three primary attitudes towards requests for disability accommodations. These attitudes enhance or hinder the students' attempts at having accommodations implemented.

Keeping in mind these respective attitudes and reactions by both students and instructors, the practice of rehearsing projected conversations between them is beneficial for both parties. Anticipating the

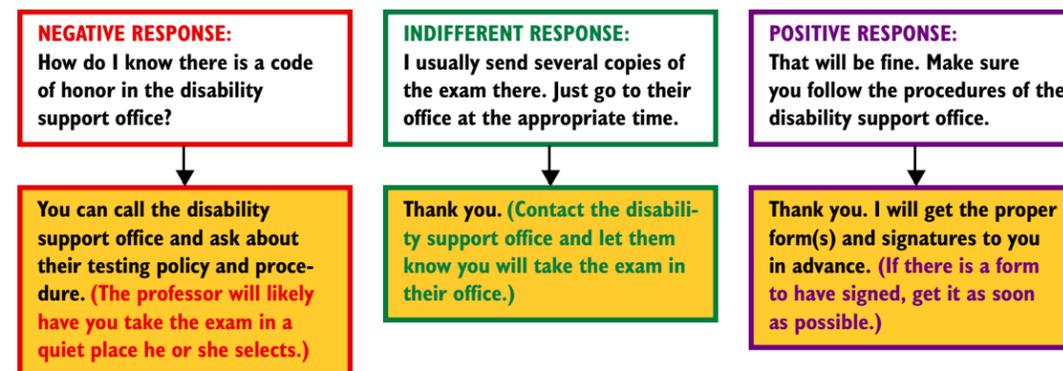
interpersonal exchanges when advocating for disability accommodations allows the student to have a road map. A plan is laid out which leads inexorably to the goal of academic success, whatever obstacle might be thrown in the way. As the authors of *Lifescrpts*, Pollan and Levine, state: "You'll have an answer to every question, a come back to every crack, and a defense for every attack" (Pollan and Levine, 1996). When planning conversations dealing with difficult personal issues, the interfering ancillary difficulties of human miscommunications can become emotional landmines. Defensive arguments can be avoided when pre-scripting difficult conversations (see examples).

Not only do disability support providers coordinate academic accommodations, but they can also serve as counselor and mentor. With the growing number of students with disabilities attending college, a two-fold increase in the last 11 years, the need for training these students in self-advocacy skills has respectively increased (Block, 2000). Training is also beneficial for instructors as they interact with and provide for students with disabilities. Anticipating such interactions

Requesting Academic Accommodations

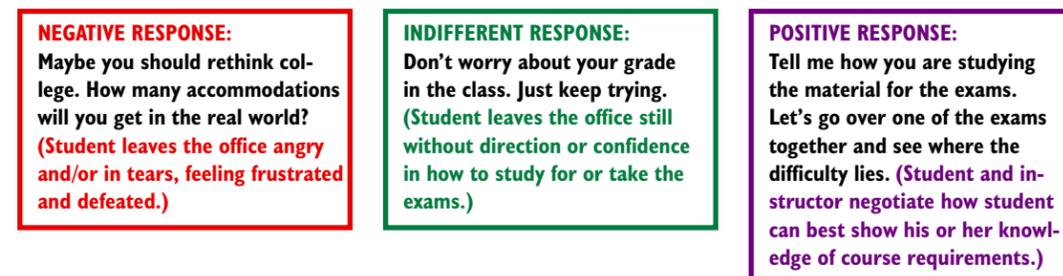
Student Initiative:

"I just came by to remind you of my accommodation to take exams in an alternative site. I would like to take my test in the disability support office."



Student Initiative:

"I have been trying hard and studying what you have instructed us to study and I am still not passing the exams. Would you allow me to take my exams in an alternate format?"



with the rehearsal of expected dialogues provides the student with disabilities positive self-esteem in self-advocacy skills and gives the instructor confidence in meeting the needs for facilitating success for those students. ■

Ronald L. English is the disability support and technology advisor for the Office of Access and Learning Accommodation at Baylor University. He teaches time management and study skills to students diagnosed with AD/HD and works with the campus faculty members on implementing accommodations.

Sheila A. Graham, Ed.D., is the director of the Office of Access and Learning Accommodation at Baylor University and has published a number of articles on considerations for students with disabilities at the post-secondary level.

References

Block, L. (June 2000). Documentation, transition and other things that worry service providers. *Disability Compliance for Higher Education*, 5, issue 11, 3.

Lynch, R., Gussel, L. (1996). Disclosure and self-advocacy regarding disability-related needs: strategies to maximize integration in post-secondary education. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 74, 352-357.

Pollan, S., Levine, M. (1996). *Lifescrpts: What to say to get what you want in 101 of life's toughest situations*. New York: Macmillan, a Simon & Schuster Macmillan Company.

Rendon, L.I. (1994). Beyond involvement: creating validating academic and social communities in the community college. Key note address American River Community College, Sacramento, CA: August 15, 1994.

Siperstein, G. (1988). Students with learning disabilities in college: The need for a programmatic approach to critical transitions. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 21, 7.

Thierfield, J. (1985). Building self concept and self esteem through assertiveness training. In J. M. Gartner (Ed.). Proceedings of the 1985 AHSSPPE Conference: Association on Handicapped Student Service Programs in Post-Secondary Education (pp. 296-299). Atlanta, GA: AHSSPPE.