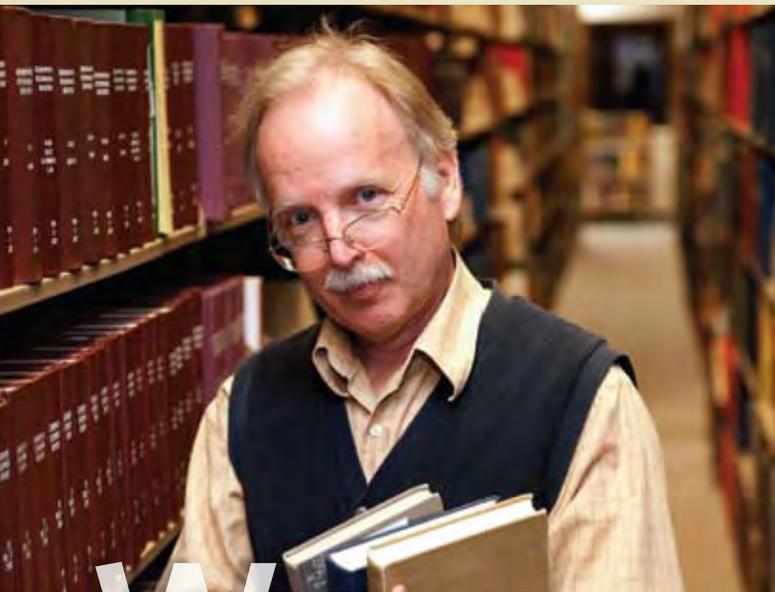


# A Professor's Perspective

by Jeanne Rollberg, MA

# AD/HD AND



**W**hen students and professors enter college classrooms this fall, many of the students will have been diagnosed with attention disorders and/or learning disabilities. Faculty members, disability resource staff, and students agree that it takes the three groups working together and an accommodation-friendly environment to help such students achieve their greatest success in college.

If both students and professors are lucky, they will be associated with institutions like the University of Washington in Seattle where there is guidance for faculty to support students with learning disabilities through such resources as DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Inter-networking, and Technology). A DO-IT web page reminds faculty:

Because there are no outward signs of a disability such as a white cane or wheelchair, students with learning disabilities are often overlooked or misunderstood... Learning disabilities may also be present along with other disabilities such as mobility and sensory impairments, brain injuries, Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD), and psychiatric disabilities.

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Like many other postsecondary institutions, the University of Washington offers online information, videos, training sessions, and other materials designed to help educate the constantly changing cadre of full-time professors and growing number of part-time lecturers about new research on learning disabilities and AD/HD.

## **Trust and disclosure**

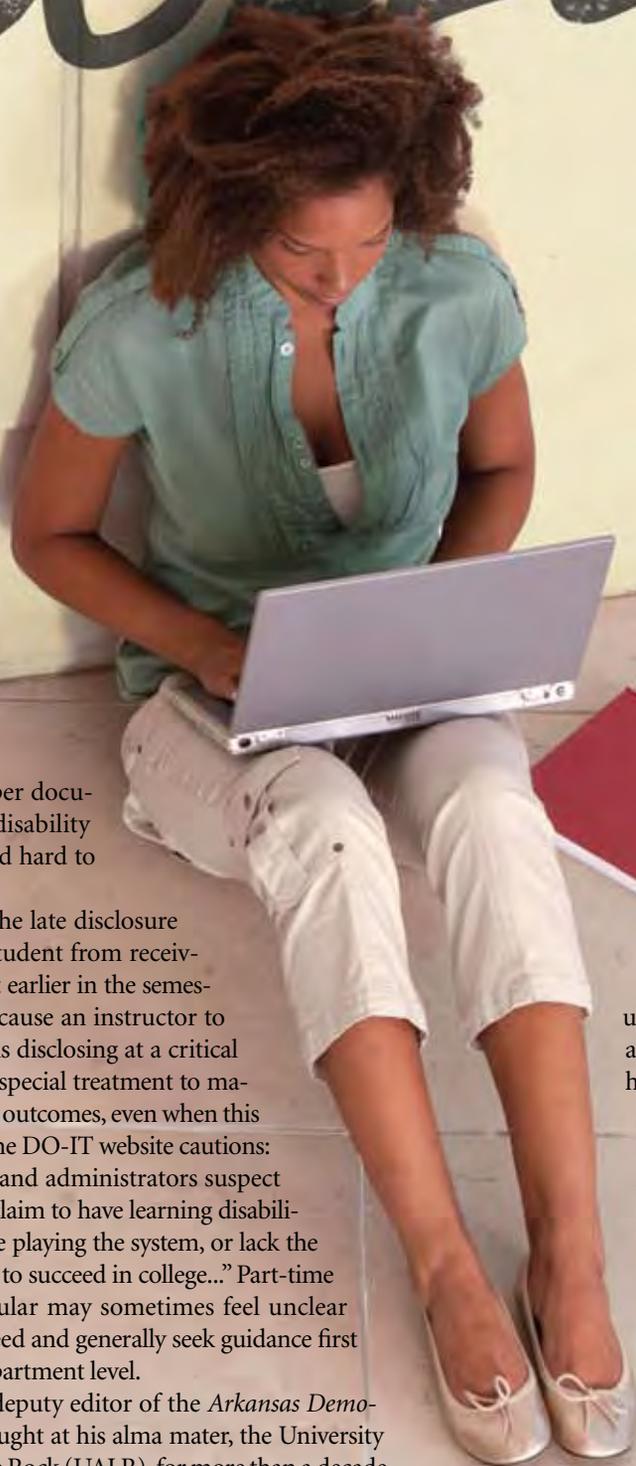
Many institutions with federal funding require professors to add statements to syllabi designed to encourage sometimes reticent students to seek assistance in individual classes and through disability resource centers. A typical statement from the University of Arkansas reads:

It is the policy of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock to create inclusive learning environments. If there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion or to accurate assessment of achievement—such as time-limited exams, inaccessible web content, or the use of non-captioned videos—please notify the instructor as soon as possible. Students are also welcome to contact the Disability Resource Center.

In partnering with students with AD/HD, teachers realize that they must not only include syllabi statements to encourage exchange of information, but they also must gain their students' trust. Professors must also respect the fact that self-disclosure is often difficult, even traumatic.

Sadly, some students wait until a semester is almost over to seek readily available assistance through disability offices or from teachers. Waiting to disclose the need for accommodations creates a lose-lose situation, even when it occurs because a student wants to be independent and to avoid using the disability as a "crutch."

# COLLEGE



Furthermore, proper documentation of the disability may be missing and hard to acquire quickly.

Not only does the late disclosure disadvantage the student from receiving needed support earlier in the semester, but it can also cause an instructor to feel that a student is disclosing at a critical juncture to receive special treatment to manipulate final grade outcomes, even when this is not the case. As the DO-IT website cautions: “Some instructors and administrators suspect that students who claim to have learning disabilities are faking it, are playing the system, or lack the intelligence needed to succeed in college...” Part-time lecturers in particular may sometimes feel unclear about how to proceed and generally seek guidance first at the academic department level.

Frank Fellone, deputy editor of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, has taught at his alma mater, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR), for more than a decade. Few of his mass communication students have asked for accommodations. As a full-time professional newspaperman and sometime lecturer who is popular with students and dedicated to teaching, Fellone acknowledges that “it’s quite possible that learning disabilities for college students are on the rise,” and that “lecturers should become more aware of the phenomenon.”

While faculty and student handbook resources may be helpful, the

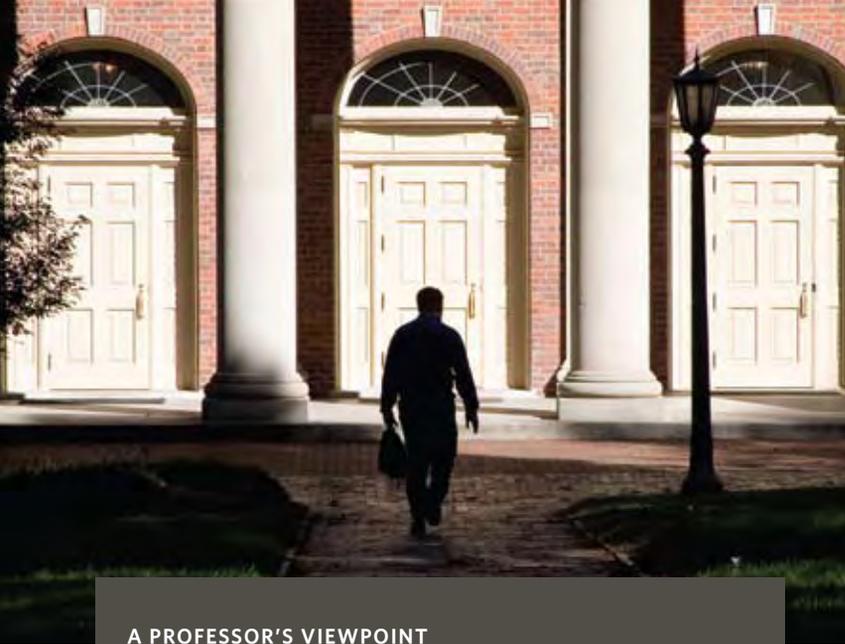
limited campus contact for lecturers such as Fellone can make receiving training a challenge. In a perfect world, Fellone says that lecturers would be updated periodically and acquire “an understanding of which learning disabilities are trending on campus, a basic understanding of how those particular learning disabilities affect students, and a starting point—what to do, where to go, how to help.” The goal is to help students succeed.

## School selection

Melanie Thornton, director of Project PACE in the Disability Resource Center at UALR, says that selecting the proper school is key to student success. Funded partially through grants from the Office of Post-Secondary Education in the U.S. Department of Education, Project PACE deals with faculty, staff, and administrators to create “suitable, inclusive, usable, and sustainable learning environments.”

Thornton encourages parents and students to check into disability support services and credentials associated with potential schools. Are there disability support advocates who are members of the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) at the school in question? Does the school have counselors available to talk about accommodation issues?

Thornton says that in assessing disability support services at an institution, she would “look to see first if they have people in that office whose focus is to work with people with disabilities in general.”



## A PROFESSOR'S VIEWPOINT

### What I Need from You as a Student

How can college students with AD/HD educate their professors about their needs as students? Here are some tips from a professor's point of view of what professors need from their students who are affected by AD/HD and/or other learning challenges.

1. Your trust that I have your best interests at heart
2. The courage to share your learning disability information with me early in the semester
3. The opportunity to see complete documentation about the learning disability so I can educate myself about ways to help you
4. The opportunity to hear directly from you what has worked well for you in the past
5. Patience and understanding as we make adjustments to assure your success as the semester progresses
6. A demonstration that you are as sincerely committed to your learning as I am

On some campuses, she points out, “the students with disabilities have to seek accommodations from people who wear multiple hats and for whom disability is not an expertise or focus.” She adds, “I would look for language about universally designed environments and working with the campus at large as opposed to putting focus on working only with individual students.” Thornton urges parents and students to familiarize themselves with the differences between IDEA and ADA and how K-12 and higher education settings respond. She recommends parents and students consult [dredf.org/advocacy/comparison.html](https://dredf.org/advocacy/comparison.html) for a primer on the subject.

Once a student has enrolled in classes, he or she can help faculty to understand his or her needs. “Because some students are concerned about disclosing the specific nature of their disabilities,” Thornton says, “traditional disability service offices provide information about accommodations for a student, but not information about the dis-

ability.” Thornton says that if students can assist by “disclosing and filling in some of the gaps, explaining to the faculty member that ‘this works better for me because...,’” the information will help the teacher to understand.

### One student's experience

Forty-six-year old Jerry Roberts learned about self-advocacy and the differences between schools the hard way—by experiencing accessibility issues and switching institutions.

Roberts was diagnosed with AD/HD and dyslexia at age 37.

“As my doctor put it,” he says, “he has never, ever seen anyone as AD/HD as I am.” Roberts and his doctor have finally settled on a regimen of long-acting stimulant medication—“and that’s the only way I stay balanced.”

The Arkansas resident is a junior at UALR, enrolled in a joint bachelor of arts in philosophy and Juris Doctor program. He originally attended a two-year college but switched schools once accommodation issues could not be resolved, a situation he says that was partly brought on by turnover in disability service personnel.

Roberts remembers working with the institution on accommodation/waiver issues all of one summer in preparation for the fall term. When no resolution was in sight two days before classes, he finally told them, “I shouldn’t have to do your job.”

He insisted on taking his case all the way to the president’s office. “At that point, I was very angry,” he recalls. “I went to his office, but his secretary wouldn’t let me talk to him.” Roberts waited until another guest was entering. “Just as that person knocked on his door and he opened it, I pushed my way in.”

The president apologized for the accommodation/waiver delays, but sensing Roberts’ impatience about the approach of school, said, “You’re just going to have to wait until I can get it in place.” Roberts replied, “I don’t. I’m done,” and decided to attend UALR instead.

Eventually his former institution contacted him to get him back into classes there, but he decided that staying at the four-year school was best for him even though the cost was higher.

Roberts says he initially encountered some problems at UALR with accommodation issues. He chose to drop one class because of doubts that the problems could be resolved quickly. The Disability Resource Center at UALR and several professors went out of their way to find accommodations to help him.

One philosophy professor in particular “went well beyond what he needed to do.” After Roberts did poorly on an initial exam, the professor said, “Let’s have a meeting with [the Disability Resource Center] and see how we can make this work. I know you really want to pass this class, and right now, you’re not going to.”

After the meeting, the problem was solved. Roberts scored an “A” on the next test and was able to improve his course grade substantially. Roberts attributes this to the concern of his teacher and the disability resource staff. His experience demonstrates that for anyone affected by AD/HD and other learning disabilities, educating faculty about your needs as a student is key. ●