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5 Tips for Disability Service Professionals to Provide Accessibility in Online Classes

Disability service professionals are on the front lines — bringing their specialized knowledge, unique strengths, and necessary insights — to ensure that all classes are accessible to deaf and hard of hearing students as colleges and schools move them online in response to the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

These five tips from the National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes at the University of Texas at Austin can help them address access issues for deaf students who use assistive listening technology, American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, speech-to-text services, captioned media, and more, as well as provide guidance to students, faculty members, and administration and leadership.

Tip 1: Communication is Key

- Make sure accessibility is addressed on all levels of your institution. Your input is essential during this transition to online classes.

- Share these 10 Tips for Educators with all faculty members, adjunct instructors, and anybody teaching online at your institution.

- Inform current students how they can update their accommodation plans with your office. What may have worked for deaf students in person may not work online.

- Students who may not have had accommodations before may need them now. Research shows only half of deaf college students file documentation or request accommodations. Let all students know how to connect with your office for support if they experience any unexpected challenges.

Tip 2: Remain Flexible When Re-evaluating Accommodations

- It won't be a 'one-size-fits-all'. Deaf undergraduates encompass a range of identities, vary in communication preferences, and 50% have additional disabilities.

- Accommodations for synchronous (everyone online at the same time) versus asynchronous (at your own pace) style courses will vary and may require more than one accommodation.

- Consider the most common accommodations used by deaf students and how they can continue in online courses.

Tip 3: Don't Cancel Service Providers

- Consistent service providers are critical for deaf students. The classroom providers assigned to the face-to-face version of the course should continue providing services in the online course. Vocabulary and other signed concepts may already be established between the student and the interpreters, while speech-to-text professionals may already have a dictionary of specific terminology prepared.

- Interpreters and speech-to-text professionals cannot be replaced by auto-generated captions for real-time communication needs. This does not provide equal access.

- Consider having on-call interpreters and speech-to-text providers available during business hours to provide services for office hours, tutoring, student group meetings, walk-in advising appointments, or other ad hoc needs. These services can be available remotely. Ask your service provider for ways to meet this need.

Tip 4: Prepare Protocols for Captioning Media

- Establish a procedure and priority list for videos, pre-recorded lectures, and other media in need of captioning. The courts recently ruled that appropriately captioned media provides equal access to students as required by law. Be wary of relying on any program that uses auto-generated captions for videos.

- Provide faculty guidelines on where to find existing captioned videos. This will help reduce the influx of requests needed. Ask if the library or other departments can assist with finding accessible instructional materials.

- If you need to caption a video or pre-recorded lecture, consider using a combination of both in-house staff or contact a captioning vendor. Staff can follow industry standards and use DIY captioning resources.

Tip 5: Manage Technology, Equipment, and Troubleshooting

- Service providers may need to be granted access to your college's learning management system (LMS), such as Canvas or Blackboard, or other videoconferencing and online resources. Work with your institution and service providers on how to access platforms.

- If students or service providers need additional devices or access to software, plan on allocating resources to temporarily loan equipment. Ask students and providers what devices they may have available for accessing online coursework (computer/laptop, tablets, smartphones, etc).

- As a backup, ask faculty to record virtual meetings and lectures, in case issues with internet connection, technology, or accomodations arise.

- When online classes begin, check in with deaf students after the first week in case there are unanticipated barriers

- Share these tips with your colleagues, administrators, and faculty. Let them know how you are planning to make your campus accessible, and how they can too. Now is the time to come together as a disability services community, support each other, and make sure everyone is involved in ensuring accessibility.

Have Questions? Contact NDC Today!

The National Deaf Center provides year-round [support](#) to faculty, disability services professionals, deaf students and their families, and service providers. [We are here for you!](#)