

Providing

Testing Accommodations

for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

Overview of Legal Obligations

As the number of deaf and hard of hearing (d/hh) students seeking enrollment in postsecondary education programs increases, the accommodations they request to ensure equal access also increases. Most accommodations, such as interpreters, note-takers, and assistive listening devices are obvious and seldom questioned. D/HH students requesting testing accommodations however, have raised many questions and have caused some confusion among service providers around the country. Some service providers feel that d/hh students should not be given any form of testing accommodation at all, while others advocate for such accommodations. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 require that tests be administered in a manner that does not discriminate against a person based on disability, but provides little direction beyond that for service providers, leaving another one of those "gray areas" to deal with.

According to the ADA, an individual must have a qualifying disability that limits a major life activity in order to receive accommodations. This brings into focus the question as to whether having a hearing loss qualifies a person to receive testing accommodations. Some higher education service providers say that a hearing loss does and others say a hearing loss alone does not. Members of the Deaf community often disagree on this point, which causes additional confusion and becomes a cultural issue.

Opponents to providing testing accommodations for d/hh students argue that students who meet the entrance requirements of the institution should also be qualified to meet academic requirements. This is a good point that should be taken into consideration when addressing requests for accommodations by students pursuing advanced degrees. Proponents of testing accommodations argue that some d/hh students may have difficulty with English as a result of their hearing loss, meeting the definition of a disability, and should be given testing accommodations.

English is considered to be an essential function in most administrative, managerial, and professional specialty occupations and to require a student to demonstrate a certain proficiency in English is appropriate. Education, psychology, counseling, law, and medical fields all require that a person have a certain level of English in order to assimilate information and write clear, accurate reports, making English an essential function of most jobs found in those fields.

There are some occupational areas, however, where even though English is important, it may not be an essential function of the job. Production, service, construction, and some technical occupations are industries with jobs where English may not be an essential part of the job. Some of these occupational areas include "high tech" jobs and require average to above average intelligence to be successfully employed.

It's common for some d/hh students to have the intelligence required for such occupations, but lack the English skills to compete with hearing counterparts on tests in occupational and general education-related courses such as English Communication classes.

This is when the service provider and the instructor need to work together and trust that each has the best interest of the student in mind. It is important that tests are reviewed to determine if the test is designed to measure English skills along with occupational content. The instructor needs to decide which is more important: content knowledge, English competency, or both. If it is determined that content is most important, then testing accommodations may be appropriate. This doesn't mean that English is not important for these occupational areas, it only means that a person can be successful in these areas without having high-level English skills.

Some service providers fear that testing accommodations provide an unfair advantage for d/hh students. Unfortunately, there is a void of data

and a need for research on the whole issue of providing testing accommodations for d/hh students in postsecondary education. Research indicates that "extended time" is an effective technique for students who have processing speed difficulties when reading. When comparing students with speed processing difficulties to those without, nearly every student who was given extended time to complete the standardized test, was able to raise his/her score to a statistically significant higher level. Interestingly, even though the students were given unlimited time, none of them used more than 50 percent of the original time allotted for the test.

It is important to approach each request on an individual basis and accept the fact that determining who should be given testing accommodations is not an exact science. There are several factors to consider when trying to decide if testing accommodations should be provided or not. Since the ADA does not require such accommodations be provided *carte blanche*, the service provider needs to determine the individual need of the student. Did the student benefit from the service in the past? Does the student have a documented secondary disability? A learning disability? What is the reading level? What is the processing rate when reading? What is the primary communication style? These are factors that can help the service provider determine if the accommodation is reasonable.

Some examples of testing accommodations provided to d/hh students include:

Extended-Time

Allowing the student extended time to complete a test. In most cases, 50 percent additional time has been found to be adequate for most students.

Test Editing

Tests made up of multiple choice and long essay questions may be confusing for some d/hh students. Modifying questions enhances the student's ability to understand the content. Providing this

accommodation should be approached cautiously with an instructor, who may feel the questions are perfectly clear. The instructor may not understand how a multiple-choice question with four answers could be confusing to a d/hh person.

Signed Test Question – Signed Response

Permitting a sign language interpreter to interpret tests is another testing accommodation that can be provided in collaboration between the instructor and the service provider. The interpreter is available to sign the questions to the student and the student is permitted to respond via sign language. This is different than having an interpreter available so that the student can ask clarifying questions (just like everyone else). The instructor needs to determine if the test is designed to measure content knowledge, English skill, or both.

Assuming the test is primarily designed to measure content knowledge, the instructor could identify the terms on the test that the interpreter should only fingerspell. This helps to eliminate the fear that the interpreter is providing additional information to the d/hh student, giving the student an unfair advantage on the test. This accommodation allows the student to respond to written questions in sign language through a sign language interpreter. This could be useful for a student who has a slower processing rate and inferior reading and writing skills.

Using Adaptive Equipment

Permit a student to use a computer for word processing on essay tests.

Distraction-Free Environment

Provide a student an environment with minimal distractions. Background noise, such as vibrations within the room or building, may not be a distraction for a hearing person but may be very intrusive for a hard of hearing person.

For more information, contact:

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