The DASS Insider

A newsletter for SMU Faculty

Information on disability services and access issues affecting your students and classes

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Distraction Reduced Environments

Definition and Best Practices

When you receive an accommodation letter with this accommodation, it means the student should be tested in an environment which minimizes distractions for the student. Each student has different levels of distractibility and different stimuli which may distract them. Instructors should discuss with the student the optimal settings in which the student will take the test. Typically, students need an environment which minimizes both auditory (e.g. copy machines, talking, other noises) and visual distractions (e.g. people walking in and out). A distraction-reduced environment does not necessitate the student's testing in a private room, nor does it mean that an environment is completely distraction-free.

Welcome Back to the Start-of-Semester (SOS) Issue

DASS is the primary contact for all SMU students with disabilities. This issue of the DASS Insider summarizes the critical items faculty and staff consider at the start of each fall semester. We encourage you to keep it handy as a first resource when questions arise with your DASS students and their accommodations. As always, DASS is here to assist you in meeting the needs of your DASS students.

Team Lead: *Alexa Taylor* Learning Specialist: *David Tylicki*
Accommodation Coordinators: *Michelle Bufkin* and *Karen Turbeville*
DASS Administrative Assistant: *Candy Brown*

Start of Semester Checklist

⇒ **Syllabus Statement**: replace with the current one provided by the Provost's office each semester. See page 4 for the current statement. Professors sometimes add requirements to the approved statement; some are appropriate, but some are not and should be avoided. An example of an acceptable addition is to encourage the student to meet with you in your office when submitting the DASS accommodation letter. Inappropriate additions include a firm deadline to deliver accommodation letters (such as in the first two weeks of school). Accommodations are determined year-round.

⇒ **Textbooks**: establish reading lists early enough that other formats of your books can be ordered by DASS if necessary. Alt Format Texts take time to order, prepare and process. Delayed delivery of these items impacts student learning.

⇒ **Reduced distraction testing environment**: determine resources for providing a smaller space for these students, preferably within your department.

⇒ **Peer notes**: determine how peer notes will be requested, delivered and verified for students with this accommodation. See page 3 for additional tips.

⇒ **Accessible material**: If videos are required, set up how these will be made available to any student, including a visually impaired student.

⇒ **Laptops**: consider ways to accommodate DASS students requiring laptops if you maintain a no laptop policy. Many faculty use a laptop contract and flexible syllabi language to provide access and maintain classroom preferences.

⇒ **Readings**: make these available at the start of the semester. This is critical for students with reading disorders who spend considerably more time with reading assignments. Also, if DASS is required to order texts in alternate forms, it can take several weeks to procure them.

⇒ **Meetings with DASS students**: many first year students will be contacting you at the start of the semester for meetings to discuss their accommodations. Determine options for making these meetings go smoothly. See page 2 for suggestions.

Accommodation Letters

Many DASS students deliver their accommodation letters in the first few weeks of a semester. In fact, DASS prints over 2500 letters each semester (for around 600 students) so we do stay very busy stuffing envelopes and meeting with new students during the first few weeks of the semester. For students new to DASS, the delivery of the letters to faculty occurs after a lengthy process involving paperwork, interviews, diagnostic testing, professional review and discussion with DASS staff. Accommodation letters:

- are provided during a 1:1 intake appointment with the DASS student (initially).
- formalize an agreement between the university and the student. They follow a predictable template to meet legal requirements.
- are not all the same. Accommodations granted for unique disability impacts may also include detailed information the student has asked our office to share with you. Please read them carefully to help frame your conversation with the DASS student.
- do not include a student's diagnosis but may contain specific information or suggestions as a means of guiding faculty to implementation options. Students retain the option of disclosing (or not) their diagnosis to others.
- are reviewed and printed for each semester of enrollment for a DASS student. Please verify the letter you receive lists the current semester below the student's name.
- should be stored in a confidential place (i.e., in a folder or drawer, not exposed on your desk)
- should be retained until after final grades have been posted for the DASS student. Letters should be shredded at that point.

Sticky Scenarios:

*Some students may provide faculty with copies of their diagnostic information or make requests for accommodations outside the DASS process. In both instances, DASS strongly encourages you to refer students to our office for these needs. Because of confidentiality demands of the review process, faculty should not agree to hold or review diagnostic reports containing protected medical information. Likewise, granting informal accommodations not recognized by the university through the DASS process can lead to situations which jeopardize the university or surprise the student when subsequent faculty do not allow accommodations without a letter. A good rule of thumb is to require the accommodation letter in order to implement accommodations in your class. This policy protects you, the university and the student.

*With the bulk of new DASS students scheduling intake appointments at the start of the semester, it often becomes impossible to complete all intake appointments before initial tests occur in classes. In these cases, DASS instructs the student to forward the DASS email confirming the intake appointment and then to request from the professor the ability to use extended time testing, if possible, prior to the letter delivery. Faculty are not obligated to provide accommodations without the benefit of the official letter, but if this flexibility is possible given adequate notice by the student, DASS encourages faculty to extend this courtesy. The Accommodations Coordinator listed on the student's email exchange can verify the likely accommodations to be granted, if needed. In these instances, DASS would be unable to proctor the test.

Meetings with Students

DASS students are required to meet with faculty to discuss and deliver their accommodation letters. During intake appointments, they are informed by DASS that simply handing a letter or placing it in a mailbox are not sufficient for their accommodations to be recognized. When DASS students request meetings with faculty, we encourage you to make this an easy step for them, as for many this will be a novel experience. Most will request a private meeting with you to discuss their accommodations. Preparing for these meetings can set the tone for your DASS students.

Some students may be nervous about meeting with you or discussing their learning needs. During the meeting, ask leading questions to help students share with you their academic strengths and struggles, so that they connect for you the purpose of the accommodations they have been granted. Some questions you may consider asking your DASS students include:

How have these accommodations helped you become a successful student?

What areas of your academic performance or learning would you like me to know about?

DASS students are instructed to remind faculty 7 days' in advance of any test they wish to use their extended time or other test-related accommodations. During this meeting, they will ask you how you wish to be reminded of their extended time testing requests. Have your preference (email, text, other) ready to provide to them. Students are instructed to bring their semester schedule to this meeting so that testing arrangements, preferably in your department, can be decided upon at that time. DASS serves as a back-up testing option if you are unable to provide the accommodations internally.

During the meeting, take notes on your conversation on the student's accommodation letter. These can be helpful should issues arise later.

If additional forms are required by a student's particular accommodations (i.e., flexible attendance), take time to complete these while meeting with the student. These are designed to stave off specific problems which commonly arise with this accommodation.

Ultimately, the purpose of these meetings is to facilitate an accommodation agreement and to build rapport between faculty and students. If our office can assist in either area, please let DASS know.

Test Proctoring

When you call the main number at DASS, you usually are speaking with Candy Brown, our DASS Administrative Assistant. Candy works with DASS students in many ways and also coordinates all the test proctoring for the department. Students order accommodation letters online and come to her office to pick them up. When giving letters to DASS students, Candy also takes the time to remind them to meet with their professors to discuss their accommodations (in office hours!). In this meeting, faculty can determine whether they're able to provide the necessary classroom accommodations, or need to explore alternatives. DASS can be an alternative, but be sure to check out our limitations on our website. Your department may have resources for you, as well, so consider talking to your department Chair person.

As you begin administering tests to your class, we, too, begin test proctoring. We serve as a back-up to faculty but your student *should* know they are responsible to schedule tests *at least* 7 days from the test date (if testing at DASS). If you don't inform your students about a test date with at least 7 days notice at DASS, that will really put them (and us…and you!) in a bind.

After your student schedules a test through the DASS online portal, you will receive a test request by email, along with an attached proctor form from DASS usually 6-7 days out from the test date. It is *critically* important to complete and send the proctor form back to DASS! This is the perfect time to contact Candy if the student has not accurately scheduled the time or date, or if the test date has been changed or cancelled or the student has decided to test with you. Clear communication between our students, faculty and the DASS office will keep misunderstandings (and stress) to a minimum. Lastly, if you do need to drop off a test (and choose not to email it to dass@smu.edu), there's a handy locked drop box right outside Room 202M for your convenience.

Please contact DASS with any questions about our policies and procedures or visit us at: https://www.smu.edu/Provost/ALEC/DASS/DisabilityAccommodations/

Note Taking Accommodations

Accommodations to assist student with note taking are one of the most common DASS accommodations. Students granted note taking accommodations typically experience difficulty with simultaneous processing of oral, visual and written material. The accommodation can take multiple forms, depending on the student's needs and class format.
The options for note taking accommodations include:

*access to a copy of peer notes, taken by a volunteer note taker in the class. Faculty solicit these note takers and facilitate the transfer of notes to the DASS student. In most cases, DASS students set up anonymous g-mail accounts, and the peer note taker scans and sends the notes each day to the DASS student. In other cases, the note taker and DASS student coordinate this transfer when the DASS student does not wish to remain anonymous. A suggested script is included in the accommodation letter to assist faculty with locating peer note takers. DASS recommends identifying at least two volunteer note takers early in the semester for each class where they are needed.

*ability to audio record class and review sessions. Recording of lectures can be accomplished by recording device, laptop or Livescribe pen. Students acknowledge in their intake appointments that any notes obtained by peers or recordings are not to be shared with others or online, and they are not available for classes they do not attend.

*ability to use a laptop for note taking. DASS recommends that faculty use laptop contracts if classroom policies prohibit laptops. See our Faculty FAQ for suggestions.

Laptops and recordings for this accommodation are more independent options for the DASS student, and are not prone to logistical delays often created by peer notes. For this reason, you may receive accommodation letters which list two of these options as a means of ensuring the DASS student is receiving equal access to class information when peer notes are not forthcoming.

When notes are not forthcoming from a peer note taker, DASS students are instructed to inform their faculty first to ask for assistance. If the gap in access is not easily and quickly fixed, we suggest DASS students reach out to our office for assistance in brainstorming solutions with faculty.

Please note, the delivery of notes or outlines before a class meets is not generally considered a reasonable accommodation.

Confidentiality

What can I say, and to whom? This can be confusing, when you receive a letter that says "Confidential"! This means you shouldn't discuss this student's disability status with anyone OTHER than the student, except in real "need to know" situations. Your TA might need to know the student has extended time for testing, but the TA does not need to see all of their accommodations or know about their condition, if the DASS student shared that with you. Also, store the letter in a secure place in your office and shred after it is not needed anymore. Do NOT talk about accommodations with this student, in front of other students, for any reason. This is the most common way a student's confidentiality has been broken, and although unintended, it can be very upsetting to the student. Failing to bcc: a group of students in an email concerning test arrangements also violates confidentiality and should be avoided. Other best practices concerning confidentiality include:

*Do not require a student to discuss their diagnosis or disability in a classroom setting.

*Avoid restrictions which would identify a student with a disability. Examples include no laptop policies, or refusals to allow students to continue in your class if their testing times require them to test at another time from class.

Resources and Troubleshooting

From time to time, faculty or staff may have questions about accommodations or concerns about a student whose difficulties may be disability-based. DASS encourages you to consult the resources below and to reach out to our office for assistance. We are here to help students gain equal access to their education at SMU, and to increase understanding of disabilities among our community. Here are some resources to manage common issues with accommodations:

DASS website/Faculty FAQs: These include your most common questions regarding working with your students with disabilities, as well as policies and procedures of the DASS office. Check out the site for the complete list.

DASS Staff: for issues with implementing accommodations OR increasing department awareness of accommodations

Academic coaching: This is a unique resource with proven benefits to students with disabilities. 1:1 sessions available to DASS students with a Learning Specialist to work on a variety of needs. Details are found HERE.

Kurzweil Firefly: All SMU students have access to this technology which converts printed text to spoken text. If students report difficulties with keeping up with readings, refer them to this tool, available from Fondren Librarians. All DASS students can access Firefly through their Accommodations Coordinator. A complete list of campus resources is HERE.

ALEC Resources: Tutoring, Writing Center, Study Skills Workshops, Academic Counseling are described HERE.

Archive of Faculty Newsletters with in-depth articles on topics of interest

Visit us online at www.smu.edu/alec/dass

Please include this statement in your syllabus:

***Disability Accommodations**: Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first register with Disability Accommodations & Success Strategies (DASS). Students can call 214-768-1470 or visit http://www.smu.edu/Provost/ALEC/DASS to begin the process. Once registered, students should then schedule an appointment with the professor as early in the semester as possible, present a DASS Accommodation Letter, and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement.*

Visit us at DASS

5800 Ownby Drive—Suite 202 Loyd Center
2nd Floor - Altshuler Learning Enhancement Center
Entrance near Gate 3 of Ford Stadium
Parking in the Meadows Garage

Phone: 214-768-1470
Email: dass@smu.edu

DASS IS MORE THAN ACCOMMODATIONS.

For resources that may be helpful to faculty and staff, please visit: http://www.smu.edu/Provost/ALEC/DASS/Resources/ForFaculty