Section 7: When a Student May Need Accommodations

The University of Toronto has committed to "provide support for, and facilitate the accommodation of individuals with disabilities so that all may share the same level of access to opportunities, participate in the full range of activities that the University offers, and achieve their full potential as members of the University community" (Statement of Commitment Regarding Persons with Disabilities, 2004).

In addition, as members of the University, supervisors and their graduate units have an obligation to provide accommodations to persons with disabilities under the Access for Ontarians with Disabilities Act of the Government of Ontario.

But more than the legal obligations, graduate supervisors have to make every reasonable effort to provide accommodations to students with disabilities to provide them the opportunity to demonstrate and develop their academic, research, and scholarly potentials to the fullest.

Accommodations vs. time-limited academic adjustments

Many, if not all, students may experience temporary obstacles during their academic career. Often such obstacles can be accommodated easily by the supervisor or the supervisory committee by one-off measures such as extending a submission deadline, relocating a meeting to a different room, providing additional temporary assistance in the lab, etc.
Some students, however, may experience disabilities that require longer-term or permanent accommodations in response to physical or sensory disabilities; chronic health or mental health issues; a learning disability or an injury. In that case, more permanent accommodations may be required based on a thorough assessment of the student’s functional limitations and academic needs. In those cases, graduate supervisors should encourage their student to contact Accessibility Services for an assessment and recommended accommodations. This will ensure that the student’s functional limitations are properly identified based on an individual assessment by a disability expert, that appropriate accommodations are recommended, and that the dignity and privacy of the student are respected.

Not all problems that a student may run into will require accommodations. For instance, many students will experience stress or anxiety prior to a thesis exam. This is not a disability if most people can be expected to have such experiences in similar situations. In that case, there is no need to provide accommodations. If it can be established, however, that a student experiences higher and more frequent stress- or anxiety-related issues than can normally be expected, reasonable accommodations may be appropriate.

**What are accommodations?**

An accommodation is any change that enables a student with disabilities to participate equally in the environment and activities of either a particular academic program or University life in general. Academic accommodations are provided when students experience disability-related barriers that prohibit demonstration of their knowledge and skills. They are provided to level the playing field upon which students can establish their success.

Accommodations are specific to the specific needs of the individual student and their program or research project. They may include making changes to course delivery, assessment methods, the types of resources provided, and physical access to a class, as well as providing lab assistants or note takers. They also may involve removing barriers of all kinds, including physical or architectural barriers, information or communication barriers, barriers caused by attitudes, as well as policies or practices. If necessary, Accessibility Services can coordinate the availability of specialized equipment or furniture.
Not all students with disabilities need accommodations. For instance, a student in a wheelchair who has access to classrooms and washrooms and can listen and take notes in the classroom may not require an academic accommodation at that particular time in their program.

**How does it work?**

**Students should be encouraged to approach their supervisor with accommodation needs.**

This presumes of course that as a supervisor you have created an environment in which the student feels safe to discuss such often highly personal matters.

If a student identifies longer-term accommodation needs, or if the supervisor becomes aware of a potential disability that may require accommodations, the student should be encouraged to contact [Accessibility Services](#) for an assessment. Recognizing that such an assessment and obtaining necessary medical and other assessment information may take time, initial accommodations may be recommended until a full assessment has been completed. It is expected that the student and their supervisor will be active participants and problem solvers in this whole process.

Student-specific accommodations are determined based on available information regarding functional limitations and their impact on the student’s academic work, as applied to the academic demands of the student's program. Such an assessment is based on information provided by the student and their healthcare practitioner, as well as information provided by supervisor and graduate unit regarding what a student must know and demonstrate in order to progress through the program. This process is also informed by provincial guidelines and knowledge of best practices that exist within the disability community and the wider academic environment.

Following the assessment, the disability counsellor will determine whether accommodations are appropriate and what recommended accommodations would be. Such accommodations are finalized in consultation with the student and the supervisor to make sure that they meet the student's needs and the program requirements and to make sure that academic standards are maintained.

Ultimately, the goal of providing accommodations is to make sure that we provide a student with the tools to be successful regardless of their disability.
Disclosure and Confidentiality

A student's specific type of disability is private medical information. Some students can openly talk about their disability, but many students experience fear and anxiety with disclosing a disability. They may be reluctant to do so because of concerns that they will jeopardize the support they receive from their supervisor and peers. They may fear being denied opportunities or creating unwanted curiosity or concern. Students are never required to disclose their disability, and under no circumstances should you ask a student to disclose this information. Instead, if you suspect a disability you should make sure that the student has access to information on resources available on campus, including Accessibility Services.

Never disclose information to other staff or faculty without receiving a student’s permission. Do not ask a student direct questions or use their name when discussing general disabilities in a group setting (e.g. discussing academic accommodations in your lecture).

Ensure that written information about a student's disability, such as their Letter of Accommodation or an email from a student, is never in plain view in public spaces.

Resources available to help support a student with disabilities

The University has many resources available to assist a supervisor in supporting a student with disability needs.

The main support is available through Accessibility Services, where a student can seek advice and support from a Disability Counsellor, Learning Strategist or Adaptive Technologist. Similar services are available at each of the UTM (AccessAbility Resource Centre) and UTSC (AccessAbility Services) campuses.

In addition to Accessibility Services, supervisors can also contact the Office of Student Academic Progress at 416.946.0424 to seek confidential advice about how to handle student-specific situations.

Be open to students who choose to discuss with you their disability or the functional limitations that are a result of their disability.