Accommodations are Individually Assessed – Let’s Talk

When one of us has a problem or issue to resolve, we want to be individually acknowledged. We do not care about how it was handled with so and so; we are different. When a case goes to the courts regarding disability discrimination, the courts are going to ask if the situation was individually assessed. It does not matter if the end result turned out to be fair and reasonable; HT has not done its part unless each student situation and request has been individually assessed because how could we know it was reasonable without that assessment. Assessment does not trump a good policy or essential requirements, but it does allow us to measure the request against our policies or a course’s essential requirements.

I have adopted a mantra from a colleague, Richard Harris, which you may have seen around campus on bulletin boards: “Nothing to you, about you, or for you, without you.” Without the student, the Office of Disability (ODS) can not assist the student. To register with the ODS the student must self-identify. Secondly, he or she must provide documentation of the disabling condition by a qualified professional. Finally, I do an intake with the student, where we determine together what accommodations are needed and appropriate. The individual assessment does not stop here, because faculty and administrative participation may be needed as well, but the accommodation process should not happen without that intake.

Of course, it is important for me to have a good overview of disabilities, the law, and best practices for accommodations. It is fairly easy to get such an overview of any disability by doing a quick search on the internet. And there are plenty of sites to discuss disability services in higher education for disability offices, students, and faculty. Here’s a link from DO-IT: http://www.washington.edu/doit/Faculty/Strategies/Disability/. The page discusses types of disabilities on campuses and how a general understanding of what’s typical can help with the strategies employed to accommodate students.

For about 30 years now I have worked with people, primarily those with disabilities. My first job was at summer camp for people with disabilities of all ages. I have worked as a teacher, a case manager, a wilderness counselor, a personal attendant, a ropes instructor. I’ve worked at schools and camps, in homes and for community agencies, with a wide variety of populations and ages. In any context, however, I believe that the most crucial step in the process of serving people effectively and with integrity involves the participation of the individual in the process.

I have learned along the way that each person has a life that was happening before I entered the picture and will continue after I move on. Each has a story that is unique, no matter how many common characteristics are shared with others. And each knows his or her story better than I do or their documentation can tell me. The person needs to be the primary source from which assistance flows. And by allowing each the chance to give his or her personal history, express concerns, and define motivation, we are acknowledging the value of the person.

Also, people have great insights into what works for them, what does not, what are their strengths, what they struggle with. It does not mean the person always knows best or what is appropriate, but it does mean that without his or her input, we will not either. Every person, every request, needs to be addressed individually, so I can make sure I’m serving our students
appropriately, as the law demands. Sometimes, I do have students who cannot or will not participate much in the intake assessment, but even that tells me something about how to proceed to best serve the student.

So if you ask me, what are the appropriate accommodations for my Bi-polar condition (or ADHD, or learning disability in reading, etc.), I am not trying to be sly when I say it depends, accommodations are individually assessed. Let’s talk.

Good luck with finals.

James Tyson