When Faculty Are *TOO* Accommodating!
By Jane E. Jarrow, Ph.D.

Most faculty members in higher education today understand the legal and educational imperatives that mandate equal access to students with disabilities through academic accommodation. Sometimes, though, problems arise from faculty who are readily prepared to provide appropriate accommodation — it is their accommodating nature that can get them, the institution, and (sometimes) the student into trouble!

Most institutions have established a clearly articulated policy as to who holds the documentation of disability, what steps a student must take to declare their need for Disability related accommodations, and how that information is communicated to faculty. But what of the student who says, “I don’t want to go through the disability services office. I want to advocate for myself and work directly with faculty and negotiate my own accommodations.” Regardless of why students choose to go this independent route (and there are both good and bad reasons for taking such a stance), the faculty member who agrees to disregard institutional policy and honor accommodation requests directly from the student may not be doing anyone a favor!

other faculty on the basis of having provided the documentation to someone in authority at the institution. If it is not made clear that the institution has not been “notified” until the documentation is provided and requests are made from such and such an office, the institution may not be in a position to defend itself from charges of discrimination by neglect for a student who does not receive accommodation by others within the institution.

Or consider this scenario — Professor A accepts the documentation and provides accommodation without going through channels, as do Professors B and C, and then Professor D says, “I will provide accommodations when I receive proper notification from Students with Disabilities Services that this is appropriate.” Professor D looks like the villain for following the rules! More distressing, however, is the possibility that the institution may be facing some very real difficulties if Students with Disabilities Services determines that some of the accommodations that Professors A, B, and C provided were not warranted by the documentation and does not prescribe those same accommodations for Professor D to provide.

Student Jeopardy: Students with disabilities will still have those disabilities after they leave the postsecondary environment. Whether they choose to go on to graduate or professional school or seek a place in the world of work, chances are that if they needed accommodations to successfully function in higher education, they may need accommodation in their future endeavors as well. More and more often, those settings beyond the postsecondary experience are ready and willing to provide accommodations on the basis of verification from the higher education institution that those same accommodations have been provided during the student’s postsecondary career. If the student has no record of having been served by the institution — if the student was never on file in Students with Disabilities Services and received all of his/her accommodations through individual discussion with faculty — that student will have no official history of being regarded or served as a person with a disability and may have a much more difficult time establishing the claim to accommodations in the future.

Bottom line: The policies and procedures were established for everyone’s protection. Everyone needs to play by the rules!

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