

Examination of Instructor Opinions on Student Disability Accommodations at the University of Iowa

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Objective:

Many students in college utilize various accommodations due to a disability, and these accommodations are intended to make education accessible. Currently, the Student Disability Services (SDS) office at the University of Iowa works with faculty, students, and staff to provide accommodations to students that create an educational environment that is accessible. However, simply supplying accommodations doesn't necessarily close the accessibility gap in the classroom since faculty/instructor attitudes, beliefs, and stigma can impact a student's educational experience. Additionally, it is important to note that the University of Iowa currently does not require disability/accommodation training for professors or teaching assistants. Information is provided to new professors and teaching assistants, and departments can request training provided by SDS. The purpose of this research project is to examine stigma from instructors and common assumptions that instructors make when a student uses accommodations associated with different types of invisible disabilities at the University of Iowa. Thus, the following research questions were used:

- Do instructors have negative assumptions, attitudes, and perceptions about accommodations typically associated with invisible disabilities?
- Do these assumptions, attitudes, and perceptions vary based on disability type?
- Do these assumptions, attitudes, and perceptions vary based on accommodation type?

Method:

An online Qualtrics survey was distributed by email to all instructors (professors, lecturers, graduate teaching assistants, etc.) at the University of Iowa. Subjects were randomized into one of three groups: the Learning Disability Vignette group, the Chronic Condition Vignette group, and the Mental Health Condition Vignette group. Subjects read three, very short vignettes each about a different accommodation, and responded to a short set of questions after each vignette. The vignettes for each disability group included the same accommodations and never named a specific disability. All questions were the same besides using language that was relevant to the specific disability type and accommodation discussed in the vignette. In the final section of the survey, all respondents were asked demographic questions. This specific study design was chosen to reduce bias and social desirability from the respondents. 222 surveys were analyzed using Anova tests.

Results/Conclusion:

Statistically significant differences between disability groups and between accommodation types within each disability group were found. Specifically, instructors were more likely to strongly agree that short breaks in class are appropriate for the student with the chronic condition compared to the student with the mental health condition ($p=.004$) and the student

with the learning disability ($p=.035$). Thus, health conditions may be viewed as more legitimate reasons to use the short break accommodation because they are physical compared to mental or cognitive. Instructors are also more likely to agree the student with a learning disability may overburden instructors compared to the student with a chronic condition ($p=.0000077$) and they are more likely to disagree that the student with a chronic condition may overburden instructors compared to the student with a mental health condition ($p=.002$). Thus, students with physical health conditions are viewed as less burdensome to instructors compared to mental/cognitive health conditions which highlights potential stigmatization of mental/cognitive conditions. Additionally, instructors are more likely to agree that the student with a mental health condition ($p=.00025$) and the student with a learning disability ($p=.00011$) may have trouble finding an experiential learning opportunity compared to the student with a chronic condition. Indicating that mental and cognitive conditions/disabilities are viewed as harder to employ and find opportunities for. These findings should be used to better understand the experience of instructor opinions and assumptions students must face when using accommodations at the University of Iowa. The findings can also be used to inform policies around disability training and the development of these training courses.