



Today's Collegian



Mr. Breitsprecher's Edition

July 18, 2005

FREE!



Self-Advocacy



Self-understanding is an important skill to succeed in college. To get the most of this self-understanding, we also need to be able to effectively communicate our needs to others.

Advocacy refers to being able to express our needs and wants. In terms of special needs, clearly describing the nature of a disability, expressing concerns, sharing weaknesses and strengths, and outlining strategies to overcome the disability are all important.

In college, these are important matters to discuss with professors. This discussion will be a lot easier and more productive if we create a list of appropriate accommodations based on a documented disability.

Practicing Self-Advocacy

Here are some questions that one should be prepared to address when advocating for their learning needs. Writing out answers can help us get started. Applying those answers to a variety of role-play situations is a great way to build advocacy skills.

1. **What is your disability?** You do not have to give a medical diagnosis and/or cause of your disability. You need to state that you have a verified, documented disability. For example: "I have documentation of a disability on

file in the *Project ASSIST* office and have been using their services."

2. **What are the educational limitations of your disability for that class?** You do have to explain your disability as you understand how it relates to the class. For example: "I have a disability related to my fine motor coordination, and as a result, I can't write quickly enough to take effective notes" or "I take medication for my disability and it slows my thinking skills and motor reaction time."

3. **Emphasize your abilities, strengths, and special interests in the class.** For example: "I have good long-term memory - once I learn something, I've got it." or "I am in pre-law and political science is my most important class this quarter."
4. **What are you doing to maximize your abilities and to compensate for your disability to succeed in that class?** Explain what has been recommended to succeed in the class. Include the extra effort you put forth. For example: "I

10 Steps Towards Effective Self-Advocacy

1. **Accept your disability.** Before you can advocate for yourself, you have to admit to yourself that you really do have a learning disability. You aren't dumb. You aren't lazy. You have probably worked very hard to hide your learning problems (even from yourself). Now is the time to admit to yourself that you have some difficulties and may need some special help in order to be successful.
2. **Admit your disability to others.** You cannot be a successful self-advocate if you continue to hide your difficulties from others. Naturally, you can't expect teachers to provide appropriate accommodations if they don't know about your disability. But it is just as important to be able to admit your difficulties to your friends. When you can really be honest about your learning disability, you will find that you no longer feel so ashamed and embarrassed about your learning difficulties. You will be able to relax a bit more in school and spend more energy learning than hiding.

Check It Out!



Self-Advocacy for College Students

The need for self-advocacy skills in a postsecondary setting is essential. Learn more about these important skills and examine some common myths about learning disabilities and advocacy at:

http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/postsecondary/nclد_selfadv.html

10 Steps Towards Effective Self-Advocacy (Continued)

3. **Understand your learning style.** Hopefully, you now have a pretty good understanding of how your brain works and how your processing difficulty interferes with your education. School psychologists and teachers can offer you some ideas that they have about your learning disability, but only you can decide what makes the most sense to you. If the ideas offered in this course don't make sense, ask for help in understanding better or ask for other ideas about information processing that might "fit" you better. If you don't understand how you learn, you can't ask for accommodations that you really need.
4. **Realize how "other issues" might interfere with your self-advocacy.** You have learned about the common effects of a learning disability including low self-esteem, communication difficulties, and attentional problems. Think about how these issues might interfere with your ability to advocate for yourself. Are you too shy and withdrawn to ask for help? Do you get angry and aggressive when embarrassed or frustrated? Are you able to communicate your needs or do you need to ask someone (teacher, parent, friend) to help you ask for accommodations? Are you impulsive and tend to say or do things that you later regret? As with your learning disability, you need to be open and honest about any of these related problems before you can be an effective self-advocate.
5. **Know what you need.** Do the accommodations listed in this course meet all of your possible needs? Which ones do you think will be the most useful for you? Can you think of other accommodations that may be better? It is not possible to anticipate all of the needs which your learning disability will cause for you. You will need to constantly rethink the accommodations and possibly come up with some ideas of your own.
6. **Anticipate your needs in each class.** Don't wait until the final exam to start thinking about accommodations. Right from the start of each class you should be thinking about how you might be able to learn the material better. Maybe the teacher has a style that confuses you. Maybe there are too many distractions in the room. Maybe assignments aren't presented clearly. Begin talking with your teachers about accommodations as early as possible.
7. **Know your rights and responsibilities.** You have learned about your legal rights to an appropriate education and appropriate accommodations to meet your needs. But are you really prepared to argue your rights with a teacher that may be "reluctant" to provide appropriate accommodations? Do you know where to turn for support when your needs are not being met? And remember, accommodations are intended to counteract the negative effects of your learning disability, not just make school easy for you. Don't take advantage of your right to accommodations by requesting things you don't really "need".
8. **Be willing to compromise.** Some teachers will bend over backwards to "accommodate" for your special learning needs. Others will be less "flexible". Be ready to compromise in order to get at least some accommodation. You may also need to "prove" to some teachers that you really need help and are not just being "lazy". Maybe make a "deal" or "contract" with a teacher. If you do this, be sure to follow-through with everything you have agreed to do. This helps to build trust.
9. **Know where to go for support.** Sometimes even an effective self-advocate needs support. Maybe to help with a "difficult" teacher. Maybe to provide advice when you get "stuck" or maybe just so you don't feel isolated and alone. Find someone who understands your learning disability and can provide support (or can even advocate for you) when needed. Use *Project ASSIST*.
10. **Plan for the future.** Many LD students just try to survive one day at a time and don't think too much about long-term goals. But to really advocate for yourself, you need to think about where you want to be in one, two, five, or ten years. What kind of work do you want to do after your education? Do you want to continue your education? When you have a very clear plan for the future, you will be better able to see the reason for your education today.

Self-Advocacy (Continued)

- spend extra time studying, using the SQ3R method" or "I use Kurzweil 3000 to help me read my text" or "I use *Project ASSIST* tutoring services." or "I just finished college study skills class last summer."
5. **What accommodation(s) from the instructor would help you learn in that class?** Explain what has been recommended for classroom accommodations. What has worked for you in other classes? You have to be specific to explain your needs. For example: "I will need a volunteer note-taker to take notes because, due to my disability, I have difficulty listening and taking good notes at the same time." or "Since I am a strong auditory learner and a poor speller, I will need to tape the class to get a good set of notes."
 6. **What accommodation(s) from the instructor would help you demonstrate your knowledge in that class, e.g., type of testing procedure?** Explain what has been recommended. You have to be specific to explain your needs. For example: "I will use extra time to take tests because it takes me longer to write due to the weakness in my hands" or "I need to take major tests in an environment with reduced distraction because I have difficulty concentrating in a room full of other people which causes me to forget the steps to solving the equations."
 7. **Are these accommodations reasonable?** Based on the impact of your disability and the law, *Project ASSIST* will suggest accommodations that do not cause undue burden and do not cause a fundamental alteration of the course content and procedures. For example: If you asked the instructor to give you the tests individually, that would be unreasonable, causing an undue burden. If you asked to be excused from taking tests, that would be a fundamental alteration of the

Self-Advocacy (Continued)

course which requires testing. The instructor may have suggestions for additional accommodations. If these suggestions do not relate to your disability, inform **Project ASSIST**. They are there to discuss these matters and help resolve issue with instructors.

Questions To Ask Instructors

- ✓ What do you recommend that I do to succeed in your class?
- ✓ What is the best way for me to study for your class?
- ✓ What is the best way for me to prepare for your tests?
- ✓ Could I get into a study group?
- ✓ What supplementary materials such as video-tapes, study guides, etc. are available?
- ✓ What are the alternative projects, assignments, or ways to demonstrate an understanding of class content?
- ✓ Could I check in with you every two weeks or so to see if my work is either satisfactory or not satisfactory or to see if I have any outstanding assignments?

Practice Makes Perfect

How would you approach the following situations and what would you say?

- ✓ Talk to faculty about a grade that was given
- ✓ Request extended test time from a faculty member, including delivering an accommodation letter to a faculty member
- ✓ Explain your learning style and disability to a tutor
- ✓ Explain your disability to an employer
- ✓ Discuss a sensitive situation with your parent(s)
- ✓ Work with a vocational rehabilitation counselor to incorporate a preferred goal into a plan for employment
- ✓ Work out a conflict with a friend
- ✓ Call about renting an apartment near campus

Quick Tips: Self-Advocacy

For students with specific learning disabilities, self-advocacy is understanding your disability, knowing your strengths and limitations, knowing your rights and entitlements, communicating your needs, taking responsibility for your success, and asking for help when you need it. Self-advocacy is an important skill in school, work, and life. Before talking to anyone else, however, ask if yourself about:

- ✓ Understanding and acceptance of self
- ✓ Taking responsibility
- ✓ Knowledge of entitlements
- ✓ Knowledge of systems
- ✓ Using available resources
- ✓ Determining personal needs
- ✓ Set Goals
- ✓ Assertive (not aggressive) communication
- ✓ Work with others
- ✓ Persistence

Self Knowledge

Be sure to understand yourself and your disability well enough to do the following:

- ✓ Decide what resources you need
- ✓ Determine which accommodations you need to be successful
- ✓ Explain clearly to others (teachers, employers, family, friends, etc.)
 - Your specific learning disability
 - Your strengths and limitations
 - The accommodations you need to be successful
 - Your entitlement to these accommodations
 - How they will help you succeed

Effective Self-Advocacy

Getting results starts with knowing yourself, your needs, and appropriate accommodations to address those needs. Once you understand what you need, identify appropriate people to discuss it with. Be reasonable, clear, concise, persistent, confident, and assertive. Here are some additional suggestions:

- ✓ Make an appointment to see the person you need to talk to, indicating the reason for the meeting.
- ✓ Decide what you want to say and exactly how you want to say it. Pay particular attention to how you will begin the conversation.
- ✓ Review your plan with a resource person, perhaps at **Project ASSIST**.
 - Role-play the advocacy interview until you are comfortable with what you have to say and how you will say it.
 - Stay in control of emotions, tone of voice, and volume. Be assertive and persistent, not aggressive.
- ✓ If the conversation does not go as planned or if you do not get what you want:
 - Stay in control of your emotions. End the discussion calmly and leave.
 - Review the steps identified above. Can you see what went wrong or what could have been done differently?
 - Discuss the situation with an appropriate support person such as the staff at **Project ASSIST**.