

Syllabus Statements: A Point of Visibility for Disability Services

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Abstract

Course syllabi are an important point of visibility for higher education disability services offices, lending importance to the presence and accuracy of disability and accommodations statements within them. The present study is a content analysis of course syllabi from a large Northern Virginia university from the Fall 2020 semester. Researchers collected syllabi from publicly available webpages—including department websites—resulting in a sample size of 61 syllabi with 58 disability/accommodation statements available for analysis. Researchers analyzed and coded syllabi for the presence of an accurate name and contact information for the institution's disability services office, the accuracy of procedures for establishing accommodations, and the usage of the office's pre-written disability/accommodation syllabus statement. Of the 58 syllabus statements, only 39.7% included completely accurate information related to disability services and accommodation-related procedures. Further, none of the syllabi in the sample used the syllabus statement(s) made publicly available by the university's disability services office. The authors outline action items for disability services professionals and other campus stakeholders to leverage syllabi as a key point of visibility for disability services and ensure that students are provided with clear, concise, and

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accurate information necessary to establish accommodations entitled to them under federal law.

Keywords: higher education, syllabi, accommodations, college students, disability services

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As students with disabilities transition to higher education settings, they shift from receiving federal protection under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to both the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Newman et al., 2019). With this shift comes significant changes in (a) how disability accommodations are established (e.g., differing documentation requirements); (b) students' responsibilities with regard to initiating, accessing, and monitoring the effectiveness of accommodations; and (c) the extent of available support throughout the accommodations process (Francis et al., 2017). Specifically, at the college level, students must disclose their disabilities to disability services offices and formally request accommodations, as opposed to a familial or educational support system facilitating this process on their behalf (Mamboleo et al., 2020). As a result, college students with disabilities need to be aware of not only the disability-related services available at the postsecondary level but also the necessary steps and requirements involved in establishing accommodations independently (Francis et al., 2018).

Research has shown, however, that college students with disabilities are often unaware of higher education disability services and, consequently, access accommodations at lower rates once they transition to college and university settings. Newman and Madaus (2015), for example, found that only 35% of high school students with disabilities who utilized accommodations at the secondary level disclosed their disabilities at the postsecondary level. Further, Scott (2019) found that 86% of students with disabilities started college unaware of postsecondary disability services, with some only learning of the services available to them through classmates or peers. These findings were echoed by Thompson-Ebanks and Jarman (2018), who found that three out of five college students with disabilities did not establish academic accommodations at their respective college or university until late in their programs of study as a direct result of not knowing that such services existed. Overall, students' unawareness of disability-related services available at the postsecondary level has been noted as a theme by scholars in the field, all of whom emphasized this issue as a barrier to postsecondary educational access (Fleming et al., 2017; Kranke et al., 2013; Lightner et al., 2012; Marshak et al., 2010).

The Importance of Syllabus Statements

To increase the visibility of disability services offices, the inclusion of disability/accommodation statements on course syllabi is a widespread practice among university faculty to communicate this important information to students, should it apply to them (Broadbent et al., 2006; Soonpaa, 2018). In many cases, disability/accommodation statements include a directive to contact the institution's disability services office to request accommodations, if applicable, as well as the office's contact information (e.g.,

phone number, office location, website). Notably, Tincani (2004) identified the inclusion of a disability/accommodation statement on course syllabi as one of the top ten strategies available to instructors to improve outcomes for college students with disabilities. This is because the syllabus, according to Soonpaa (2018), serves not only as a “notice of system-mandated rights and responsibilities,” but also as a constant opportunity to provide students with information related to relevant campus support services (p. 834). Conversely, any conflicting information related to student support services on course syllabi—including disability services—is confusing, problematic, and may lead to the ultimate dismissal of their usage (Broadbent et al., 2006).

Despite the importance of an accurate disability/accommodation statement in course syllabi, there is a paucity of research on the extent to which their inclusion occurs. Broadbent and colleagues (2006), however, analyzed 111 syllabi at a small, private liberal arts college to determine the frequency of disability/accommodation statements utilized among faculty at their institution. Based on their coding and analysis, they concluded that only 30% of selected syllabi included a disability/accommodation statement, demonstrating a significant unawareness of disability services on their campus (Broadbent et al., 2006). Broadbent and colleagues (2006) did not, however, assess the quality of these statements for the accuracy of information related to disability services or accommodation-related procedures.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to evaluate both the presence and quality of information regarding academic accommodations and a disability services office in university course syllabi. This study builds on previous literature by analyzing the number of syllabus statements in addition to their quality and accuracy. The researchers use the results to make recommendations for disability services professionals and other campus stakeholders regarding outreach, visibility, and collaboration to leverage course syllabi as a means of communication to ensure that students are aware of disability-related services and the appropriate procedures to initiate and request accommodations.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this research:

1. At a university where the disability services office provides pre-written templates for appropriate and accurate syllabus statements, what percentage of instructors are currently using them in their course syllabi?
2. How is information related to accommodations and disability services offices being presented in university course syllabi?
3. How accurate are course syllabus statements regarding procedures for initiating academic accommodations and the appropriate contact information for disability services offices?

Method

Research Design

The present study is a content analysis of disability/accommodation statements within syllabi from a large public institution in Northern Virginia, with a total undergraduate enrollment of 25,000–30,000 students. Content analysis is defined by Krippendorff (2013) as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 24). Further, content analysis is methodologically systematic and allows researchers to take otherwise basic data into a multidimensional plane for engaging in an in-depth assessment of the meaning of textual artifacts (Metzger, 2019). As a result, using content analysis methodology allowed the researchers to take previous research on disability/accommodation statements a step further by analyzing the meaning within the selected syllabus statements and drawing conclusions to present implications for the field.

Consistent with content analysis methodology and qualitative research, the researchers understood all syllabus statements in relation to their broader contexts. Specifically, researchers understood all disability/accommodation statements as positioned in and reflective of societal and global conversations surrounding disability and the usage of disability-related services in higher education settings. Moreover, researchers viewed each disability/accommodation statement as a culmination of perspectives on disability from (a) the faculty member who authored it, (b) their respective academic department, and (c) the institution itself. Overall, the researchers acknowledged that all disability/accommodation statements were influenced by their author’s positionality and inevitably intertwined with multiple perceptions of disability and usage of disability-related services.

Data Collection

Researchers determined the population (N) of courses to collect syllabi by using the university’s digital course catalog to input predetermined inclusion criteria. Syllabi for the population were selected based on the following inclusion criteria (see Table 1): derivative of courses that took place during the Fall 2020 semester; online, hybrid, or face-to-face delivery methods; based in any university college or department; lecture-based format, located at the university’s main campus; one full-semester in length; and undergraduate courses. Exclusion criteria for the search consisted of the following: derivative of any semester before the Fall 2020 semester, courses that took place outside of the university’s primary campus, delivered in non-lecture formats, graduate or doctoral-level courses, and alternative timeline courses (8-week courses, summer sessions, etc.).

This inclusion criterion resulted in a total of $N=253$ courses from which to collect and analyze syllabi. To achieve a confidence level of 95% from the population, researchers determined the desired sample size (n) of 153 by numbering each course from 1–253

and using a random number generator to collect a random sample from the population syllabi. Once 153 courses were selected for the sample, researchers used convenience sampling to view the first available syllabus that met the inclusion criteria for each course in a sequential listing of the course sections, if multiple were publicly available. Researchers collected all syllabi from each course's respective department website. Of the 153 courses randomly selected, a total of 61 syllabi were publicly available for collection. Of the 61 collected syllabi, three did not include a disability/accommodation statement, leaving 58 total syllabi to move into the coding phase of content analysis. All instructor names were redacted from the syllabi to reduce coder bias before coding. Courses spanned several of the university's colleges and departments.

Coding

One researcher developed a coding system for analyzing each of the 58 syllabi. After engaging in open coding to identify appropriate categories, three overall themes emerged for analysis: (a) the presence of accurate contact information for disability services, (b) the presence of accurate procedures related to establishing academic accommodations through the disability services office, and (c) the presence of the accurate name of the office. From these themes, the researcher developed corresponding categories and rules for coding. Each theme formed a category, and rules were determined using components of a publicly available syllabus statement from the university's disability services office (see Table 2). Once the coding system was finalized, researchers coded all sample syllabi independent of one another.

To determine the presence of accurate contact information for the disability services office, researchers analyzed each disability/accommodation statement for the total number of accurate components when referring to any of the following: email address, location, phone number, and web address for the disability services office. If any components included in the syllabus statement were inaccurate (e.g., an incorrect phone number), the syllabus was coded with a "0" for this category. If all components of the contact information were accurate, the syllabus was coded with a "1." For coding the accuracy of the name of the disability services office, researchers determined that either *Disability Services* or *Office of Disability Services* would elicit a "1" given a recent change from the latter to the former. Any other name for the office resulted in a code of "0."

To determine the quality and accuracy of procedures related to establishing accommodations through the disability services office, researchers sought a directive for students to contact the office directly and an indication that accommodations can be established at any point during students' academic careers, both of which are included in the templated syllabus statement offered by the university's disability services office. If either of these were included and at least one was inaccurate, the syllabus was coded with a "0." Once each researcher completed coding, they met to discuss discrepancies in their results and reach a consensus on the final codes for each syllabus statement.

After all codes were agreed upon, researchers proceeded with descriptive data analysis of results using SPSS quantitative data analysis software.

Trustworthiness

Researchers employed several strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. First, the sampling procedures allowed for the collected syllabi (n) to reflect a wide variety of colleges, departments, and courses at the institution. Second, both researchers independently coded the 58 syllabi using the predetermined rules and units of meaning. Cohen's kappa, defined as "the proportion of joint agreements in which there is agreement," was then calculated using SPSS to determine initial interrater reliability across the three categories for analysis (Cohen, 1960, p. 46). Results of the calculation demonstrated substantial agreement between researchers at $k=0.668$ (95% CI, 0.667 to 0.668). The researchers then discussed any coding discrepancies until they reached 100% agreement across all syllabi before interpreting the findings. Third, within these discussions, the researchers discussed instances of potential bias that may have influenced the coding process. As two former disability services professionals at the institution, it was imperative to recognize this position and how it may have impacted the analyses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Results

Overall Accuracy

Although 61 courses were selected for analysis, only 58 of the corresponding syllabi included a statement regarding disability services and/or accommodation-related procedures at the university. Among the 58 syllabi, none ($n = 0$) utilized either of the two templated syllabus statements made available by the university's disability services office on their public website. Further, less than half of the syllabi ($n = 23$, 39.7%) contained completely accurate information for both accommodation-related procedures and how to contact the campus' disability services office. The remaining 60.3% of the syllabi either lacked one of the two variables for analysis or included information related to disability services or the process for establishing accommodations that were inaccurate. The remaining findings are organized around the accuracy of contact information for the disability services office and the accuracy of accommodation-related procedural information.

Accurate Contact Information

Most syllabi ($n = 45$, 77.6%) included accurate contact information (location, email, phone number, website) for the disability services office. Less than a quarter of the sample ($n = 11$, 19%) was absent any contact information for the disability services office. Only 48 ($n = 82.8%$) of the syllabi included an accurate name of the campus'

disability services office (Disability Services). Variations included: *Student Disability Resource Center*, *The Office of Disability Resources*, and *Student Disability Office*. Of the 10 syllabi (17.2%) that used an inaccurate office name, 4 used two different incorrect names within the same disability/accommodation statement.

Accurate Accommodation-Related Procedures

Thirty-seven (63.8%) of the syllabi included holistically accurate procedures for establishing disability-related accommodations (i.e., students can register with the disability services office at any time and should contact the office to initiate the registration process). Inaccuracies were most related to the timeline for which students can and/or must initiate the disability services' registration process ($n = 15$, 25.9%). Specifically, there were 6 syllabi (10.3%) with statements suggesting that students must register with their disability services office within the first two weeks of the semester. Other syllabi included directives for initiating accommodations within the first week of the semester ($n = 3$, 5.1%), and others broadly requiring initiation at the semester's start ($n = 9$, 15.6%). Most syllabi ($n = 50$, 86.2%) included a directive to contact the disability services office to initiate their registration process to establish accommodations.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate both the presence and quality of information regarding academic accommodations and a disability services office in university course syllabi. Because course syllabi act as a consistent communication tool across every class, department, and college in higher education settings, they must contain relevant and accurate information related to disability services to reach every student who may seek accommodation-related support. Failure to do so not only risks students with disabilities not knowing about available higher education disability services or how to request accommodations but also puts institutions themselves at risk of not meeting federal requirements to provide equal access to students with disabilities (ADA, 1990; Rehabilitation Act, 1973).

Previous researchers demonstrated a critically low number of disability/accommodation statements altogether within course syllabi at a university (Broadbent et al., 2006). A significant finding of the present study, however, showed that the presence of disability/accommodation statements has increased since the most recent study conducted by Broadbent and colleagues (2006), suggesting a positive move towards greater awareness of disability services on college campuses. Despite an increase in inclusion, results showed that the presence of a disability/accommodation statement within a syllabus does not necessarily reflect appropriate inclusion of this information; information regarding disability services and accommodation-related procedures was found to be concerningly inaccurate and inconsistent across the institution. This finding was significant concerning the first research question, which sought to gauge how frequently

faculty members employed the template syllabus statement(s) made publicly available by the university's disability services office. This statement had been publicly available for 1–2 years at the time of this research, and it is consistently presented during any disability services-led faculty training, communications, etc. Unfortunately, the sample returned a complete absence of the pre-written disability/accommodation statement's usage.

Overall, major findings related to the accuracy of disability/accommodation statements revealed that incorrect information was most often related to accommodation-related procedures and the name of the disability services office itself. This suggests that authors of the disability/accommodation statements are not being communicated with the correct information, are not actively seeking it out, or some combination of both. Interestingly, researchers noted that several colleges and departments within the institution provided a template syllabus to their faculty, indicating that the source of some templated elements was managed by a central office or location. Regardless of the source, the inaccuracy of accommodation-related procedures, specifically, has the danger of acting as a barrier to students with disabilities in accessing their courses.

Claiming that accommodations must be established within the first two weeks of the semester, for example, could potentially deter students who do not feel comfortable initiating services immediately or those who develop one or more disabilities later during their college career from obtaining accommodations altogether. Any syllabus-related delay in initiating accommodation-related services, while an unintentional occurrence resulting from a lack of time or resources to routinely update syllabi, has the potential to negatively impact students' access to course content, and inherently hinder success in a course. Syllabi must communicate to students that individuals with disabilities can initiate accommodations at any point in time and reflect an accurate name for the appropriate office to contact to avoid confusion and any further barriers to the receipt of accommodations.

Implications

Results of this study lead to several implications for disability services professionals and other campus stakeholders to ensure that all students at their college or university are communicated with consistent, accurate information regarding disability services via their course syllabi. First, because of the frequency and variation of inaccurate disability/accommodation statements in course syllabi, disability services offices may consider developing a pre-written, accurate syllabus statement for faculty to use. This statement should concisely reflect the office's procedures for establishing accommodations as well as whom a student could contact to initiate the registration process. It is evident, however, that efforts should not stop there; simply placing a pre-written disability/accommodation statement on the disability services website or sharing it during department-wide faculty training may not be enough to ensure that faculty include it in their course syllabi.

It is recommended, therefore, that disability services professionals determine who the gatekeepers are to faculty for the university's colleges and departments to move their office's pre-written syllabus statement through the pipeline and into course syllabi. This may involve several variations of outreach efforts, such as visits to the offices themselves or contacting the department/college heads directly. Once the gatekeeper has been identified, it should be determined if the prewritten syllabus statement will be sent to faculty by either them or by the disability services office themselves. To enhance the effectiveness of this outreach, disability services professionals may want to craft a brief explanation as to why accurate disability/accommodation information within course syllabi is important and offer a sincere acknowledgment of the work that they do for students. Finally, in any faculty outreach efforts, it will be important to include the contact information of someone within the disability services office for additional questions or concerns related to the syllabus statement, its importance, and its usage.

Second, in addition to developing and disseminating a prewritten disability/accommodation statement, findings indicate that disability services professionals should consider making general efforts to bridge the gap between themselves and the faculty members of their institution. If syllabus statements are interpreted as a reflection of a faculty member's knowledge of (a) their campus' disability services office and (b) the corresponding accommodation-related procedures, one can conclude from this study that this knowledge is limited, if not skewed. Efforts to increase such awareness may include attendance at college/department meetings with the intent of information-sharing, outreach via email, presence at new-faculty orientation events, and a general open-door policy for faculty to contact the office or learn more about their services.

Third, college and department leaders (e.g., deans, directors) should monitor any disability/accommodation-related information (e.g., template syllabi) they provide to their faculty and staff for accuracy and consider how they can form a strong partnership with disability services offices to stay abreast of changes in any accommodation-related procedures. There are legal risks involved in students not receiving appropriate accommodations due to inaccurately communicated information on the university's behalf. University attorneys and ADA compliance officers are encouraged to be involved in efforts to increase the visibility of disability services offices, with course syllabi as an important starting point.

Finally, because compliance with federal law regarding equal access and accommodations is a shared institutional responsibility, there are several implications for other campus stakeholders to ensure postsecondary disability services offices are visible in course syllabi. Faculty and course instructors are encouraged to routinely review their syllabi each semester for (a) the inclusion of a disability/accommodation statement and (b) its accuracy regarding accommodation procedures and disability services contact information. Moreover, if their university's disability services office provides a pre-written disability/accommodation statement, faculty and instructors are encouraged to copy and paste it directly into their syllabi each semester.

Limitations

The present study is limited in its generalizability because of the small sample size that resulted from the original population of courses selected for analysis; data collection efforts did not exceed publicly available information and therefore returned a limited number of syllabi for coding. Further, not all the syllabi collected included a disability/accommodation statement, reducing the sample even further. The sample used in the analysis does not reflect the complete scope of courses at the institution, as criteria for inclusion limited the population to undergraduate, lecture-based, face-to-face courses in the Fall 2020 semester on a single campus at an institution with schools and departments spread across multiple locations.

It is also important to note that researchers extracted syllabus statements from the larger context of the courses themselves. As a result, the researchers were not privy to how faculty may have communicated disability-related information to students outside of the syllabus (i.e., verbally, email, flyers/business cards available during class). The study would have been strengthened, therefore, by triangulating the data through interviews with not only the faculty themselves but also with students who have registered with the campus's disability services office. Specifically, conversations with faculty could have shed light on the experience of developing a course syllabus and crafting an appropriate disability/accommodation statement, while students could have spoken about the experience of receiving this information and making subsequent decisions related to initiating the disability services registration process.

Future Research

Future researchers should seek a larger, more comprehensive sample size that encompasses the multifaceted nature of college course offerings, including the addition of graduate-level and online courses. If this study were to be replicated, effort should be made to bolster data collection by contacting faculty or departments directly to obtain syllabi that may not be publicly available. Finally, any future researchers should include interviews with both students and faculty regarding disability/accommodation syllabus statements and their effectiveness in communicating accommodation-related information. Although the researchers concluded in the present study about the importance of accurate syllabus statements, these would be strengthened by understanding, from students' perspectives, how syllabus statements impact their perceptions of inclusion in classroom settings. Alternatively, conversations with faculty may shed light on their experiences in developing course syllabi and the cumulative experiences that lead to what is and is not included in them.

Finally, it may be beneficial for future researchers to engage in appreciative inquiry with a disability services office that effectively developed and disseminated a prewritten syllabus statement with a high rate of usage among university faculty. Highlighting the work of an exemplar partnership between disability services and university faculty could help to provide clear action items for other disability services offices to follow

in their efforts to increase their visibility amongst students with disabilities. At an institution where these efforts are successful, it would be worthwhile to gain an understanding from students who do register with their disability services office as to how exactly they came to find out about it; doing so may contribute to the effectiveness of disability/accommodation statements altogether and the experiences of students newly receiving accommodations.

Conclusion

Course syllabi serve an important purpose of communicating pertinent information to all college students, including students with disabilities. This consistent role of information-sharing—across all courses, departments, and universities—serves as a key leverage point to ensure disability and accommodation-related information is communicated to students who may, at any point in time, seek out disability-related support. It is evident from the present study and those before it that there is work to be done not only in making certain that disability/accommodation statements are included in syllabi, but that they are also accurate in what they convey. Doing so may play a key role in increasing the visibility of disability services offices and their services altogether, thus ensuring both access and success in higher education among students with disabilities.

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We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Tables

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Syllabi

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Derivative of the Fall 2020 semester	Derivative of any semester before Fall 2020
Online, hybrid, or face-to-face delivery methods	Based outside of the university's primary campus
Based in any university college or department	Delivered in a non-lecture format
Delivered in a lecture-based format	Graduate or doctoral courses
Located at the university's main campus	Alternative timeline courses
One full semester in length	
Undergraduate course	

Table 2. Categories for Coding and Their Corresponding Definitions

Category	Definition
Accurate DS Office Contact Information	Presence and complete accuracy of any of the following components: phone number, email address, web address, physical office location.
Accurate Name of DS Office	Exclusive presence of either <i>Disability Services</i> or <i>Office of Disability Services</i> (due to recent change from former to latter name).
Accurate Accommodation-related Procedures	Presence of one or both of the following accommodation-related procedures: 1) students may initiate accommodation-related services at any time in their academic career, and 2) students should contact the disability services to initiate this process.