Getting Along in College: Recommendations for College Students With Disabilities and Their Professors

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To examine behaviors that promote effective teaching and learning and facilitate problem-free interaction between professors and their students with disabilities, 75 college students with disabilities were interviewed, along with 57 professors who were nominated by one or more of these students as one of their outstanding teachers. Participants indicated their feelings and behaviors in a variety of commonly occurring situations where professors and students with disabilities might interact. They also indicated their thoughts and feelings before and after taking action and rated the effectiveness of each of their behaviors. Thoughts and feelings that facilitate or hamper interaction between students with disabilities and their professors are discussed along with the nature of effective and ineffective behaviors by both students and professors. Recommendations are made concerning possible actions by rehabilitation professionals to facilitate effective interaction between students with disabilities and their professors and to enhance the teaching-learning process.

The 1980s have seen a dramatic increase in the number of students with physical and sensory disabilities entering institutions of postsecondary education (cf. Fichten, 1988). Real access to postsecondary education, how-

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ever, means more than mere admission and the absence of physical barriers (Fichten, Bourdon, Creti, & Martos, 1987; Jarrow, 1987; Stilwell, Stilwell, & Perrit, 1983). Some special consideration from professors is often necessary if students are to persist with their studies and succeed in completing course requirements (Kay, 1984; Moore, Newlon, & Nye, 1986).

Both in Canada and in the United States, postsecondary educational institutions have been attempting to make their facilities accessible and to provide services and equipment needed to help students with disabilities to succeed. Although most institutions have a long way to go before the physical needs of all students with disabilities are met, at least a credible beginning has occurred. The awareness of professors regarding the special needs of students with disabilities and professors' responses to the concerns of students are vital to student success (Fonosch & Schwab, 1981; Moore, Newlon, & Nye, 1986; Nathanson, 1983; Ragosta, 1987; Walker, 1980). Although increasing numbers of professors are encountering students with disabilities in their classrooms, training opportunities to learn how to meet the needs of students with special needs are lacking in many colleges and universities.

Professors are expected to be experts; however, they often have doubts and concerns about their ability to teach students with disabilities effectively. They may be experts in their disciplines, but most professors are not experts in adapting their courses to students with special needs. Professors generally have positive attitudes toward students with disabilities (Fonosch & Schwab, 1981; Patton, 1981; Schoen, Uysal, & McDonald, 1987) and would like to help, but often do not know how. As a result, they frequently do nothing. Some try too hard, and with the best of intentions, inadvertently patronize or do too much for their students—actions that are frequently resented by the students, who find such behavior demeaning and frustrating. Problems in the teaching-learning process can arise because professors do not know how to adapt their courses to the special needs of students (Alexander, 1979), because they are uncomfortable in dealing with them (Nathanson, 1983), and because some students are also uncomfortable with professors and reluctant to ask for needed special considerations (Newman, 1976).

As with all students, students with disabilities have concerns about how to relate to their professors. Students who have disabilities, however, may experience such concerns more frequently and the problems they encounter with courses may relate to their specific impairments. Therefore, interacting effectively with professors is particularly important for students with disabilities.

Previous research conducted by the current authors (Amsel & Fichten, 1990; Fichten, Amsel, Bourdon, & Creti, 1988) indicates that both students and professors believe that it is more desirable for students to approach

professors concerning needed adjustments than it is for professors to approach students. Yet, the results of these studies also show that students with disabilities believe that it is *less* acceptable to request special consideration than do either their professors or nondisabled students. Moreover, the findings indicate that professors are more likely to grant special consideration to students with disabilities than to nondisabled students. Nevertheless, they have also been shown to be less likely to approach students with disabilities than nondisabled students when they encounter problems or when they have concerns about student performance. Therefore, this overly sensitive approach by professors may fail to provide equivalent consideration and opportunities to students with and without disabilities.

Implementation of needed accommodations is more closely related to the manner in which students approach faculty members than to other factors such as the professor's background, college policy, or previous contact with persons with disabilities (Farbman, 1983). Because students with disabilities underestimate the appropriateness of requesting assistance from their professors, they may request less consideration from their professors than they actually need or they may present their needs in an ineffective manner. This situation could impede the student's academic progress and turn the disability into a handicap.

To combat maladaptive beliefs held by students with disabilities concerning seeking out needed assistance from their professors, this study explored the thoughts and feelings of students concerning interactions with professors in different academic contexts and investigated the effectiveness of different methods students use to deal with professors. Also, the thoughts and feelings of students before and after taking action to resolve difficulties were examined in order to evaluate cognitive and affective incentives and impediments to effective behavior. To develop recommendations concerning optimizing the teaching-learning process between professors and their students who have disabilities, the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of professors who were considered outstanding by their students with disabilities were also investigated.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 75 college and university students (38 men and 37 women) with various physical disabilities and 57 college and university professors (38 men and 19 women).

Students. Student participants were recruited through coordinators of services for students with disabilities, associations for students with disabilities, and personal contacts. Twenty-four of the participating students

were enrolled in a junior-community college and 51 in a university. Of the 75 student participants, 69% were students at the time of the interview; the remainder had graduated or dropped out during the previous 3 years. The majority (58%) were enrolled on a full-time basis. On the average, students were taking four courses during the semester in which they were interviewed (range=1–7). They had been enrolled in postsecondary educational institutions for an average of 5 years (range=1–16) and had already completed an average of 33 courses (range=3–76).

Mean age of students was 27 (*SD*=8, range=18–61), with 64% falling into the 18–27 age range. Students had a variety of impairments: 30 had visual impairments, 38 had mobility or muscular impairments, 16 had hearing impairments, 8 had speech impairments, and 13 had other disabilities (some students had multiple impairments). The mean duration of disabilities was 17 years (*SD*=10, range=1–45). Students were enrolled in a variety of programs: social sciences, education, commerce, languages, literature, medicine, engineering, mathematics, computer sciences, social work, pure and applied science, biochemistry, fine arts, and health sciences. The majority were enrolled in a social science program.

Professors. Participating students were asked to name three of their favorite professors during the past 3 years; these nominations were used to select the sample of professors to be interviewed (one professor per student—whomever they mentioned first or whoever could be contacted first). Out of the 57 professors contacted, 11 professors were nominated by two or more students. None of the professors nominated by seven of the students could be reached. All professors contacted agreed to participate.

Professors taught at five junior-community colleges and two universities in Montreal. Twenty-seven professors taught at a junior or community college and 30 at a university. A variety of disciplines were represented: social sciences, fine arts, mathematics, literature, commerce, education, social work, physics, and chemistry. Most professors taught courses in the social sciences.

The average class size in which students with disabilities were taught was 37 (range=10–250). Ten professors had taught only one student with a disability. The remainder had taught several (*M*=7 per professor). In the past 3 years, 30 professors had taught a student with a visual impairment, 29 had taught a student with a mobility or muscular impairment, 22 had taught a student with a hearing impairment, 8 had taught a student with a speech impairment, and 13 had taught students with other disabilities.

Procedure

Students completed a structured interview during which they were asked questions about their academic background, degree of comfort with professors, and level of satisfaction with treatment received from professors in the past (10-point scales from 1=*very uncomfortable or dissatisfied* to 10=*very comfortable or satisfied*). They also provided answers to a series of six questions concerning each of 12 commonly occurring situations where students and professors might interact (see Table 1): (1) level of comfort in the situation (1=*very uncomfortable* to 10=*very comfortable*); (2) thoughts and feelings in the situation; (3) action(s) taken by the student; (4) feelings about one's action(s); (5) satisfaction with one's action(s) (1=*very dissatisfied* to 10=*very satisfied*); and (6) perceived effectiveness of each action (1=*very ineffective* to 10=*very effective*). In addition, students were also asked about possible behaviors by professors that would make it easier for students to succeed in their classes.

Professors completed a structured interview where they were asked a variety of questions about their teaching experience, their actual and preferred initiation of contact between professors and students with disabilities, and their level of comfort when contact was initiated by the student and by themselves (10-point scales). They also responded to the same series of six questions as the students concerning each of nine commonly occurring situations where professors and students might interact (see Table 2) as well as to questions that related to what students with disabilities could do to make it easier for professors to teach them effectively.

Behaviors noted by students and by professors were coded with the use of behavior coding manuals specifying 52 student behaviors (Fichten, Goodrick, & Tagalakis, 1988a) and 23 professor behaviors (Fichten, Goodrick, & Roper, 1988). Thoughts and feelings before and after taking action were coded using three cognition coding manuals. One manual was used to evaluate the thoughts of students: (1) thoughts related to professors, (2) thoughts related to courses, (3) thoughts about independence, (4) thoughts about taking no action, (5) thoughts concerning oneself, and (6) thoughts about peers (Fichten, Goodrick, & Tagalakis, 1988b); another manual was used to evaluate the thoughts of professors: (1) thoughts related to students' academic characteristics, (2) thoughts related to other characteristics of students, and (3) thoughts concerning oneself (Goodrick, Roper, & Fichten, 1988). A third manual was used to evaluate the valence (positive or negative) of thoughts (Fichten, Martos, Robillard, & Tagalakis, 1987).

TABLE 1

Mean Comfort With Professors and Satisfaction With Treatment by Professors Reported by Students

Variable		Groups: Visual Impairment	Mobility or Muscular Impairment	Hearing Impairment	Speech Impairment	Other Disability
Comfort with professors	*M*	7.63	7.80	7.16	7.56	7.77
	SD	1.27	1.64	1.86	1.40	2.01
Satisfaction with treatment by professors	*M*	7.88	7.62	6.63	6.44	7.31
	SD	1.41	1.78	2.49	2.29	2.26

Note. The higher the score, the more comfortable or satisfied. Maximum score = 10.

TABLE 2

Mean Comfort Reported by Students in Various Situations and Mean Satisfaction With Their Actions

Situations	Comfort in the Situation Before Taking Action	Satisfaction After Taking Action to Address Concerns
General Issues		
During the first few days of classes	6.36	7.41
If student needs special consideration	6.23	7.45
If student needs help from classmates	6.13	7.25
Talking to professors outside of class time	7.21	7.57
If student notices professor's discomfort using everyday words related to the disability	6.91	8.23
Concerns of Students With Different Disabilities		
When a student with a hearing impairment has difficulty understanding a professor	4.00	6.79
When professors don't understand a student's speech	4.38	6.50
When a student with a visual impairment has concerns about exams, handouts, texts, readings, and audiovisual materials	6.67	7.16
When a student with a mobility or muscular impairment has problems with attendance, field trips, libraries, exams, and assignments	6.11	7.57
Grading Issues		
When course requirements are difficult to meet because of the disability	6.01	7.09
Failing because the disability made course requirements *impossible* to meet	4.16	6.67
When the final grade is a failure but this is *not* due to the student's disability	5.75	5.85

Note. Higher scores indicate greater comfort or satisfaction. Maximum score = 10.

taking action, and more positive than negative thoughts afterwards. Student thoughts were least positive, both before and after taking action, in the following situations: when there were problems communicating because students and professors could not understand each other's speech, and when the student was failing.

Students' thoughts were concerned mainly with their professors. These thoughts focused on professor beliefs about the student's credibility and competence, professor cooperation and empathy, professor reactions to the disability and to the student, special treatment, professor teaching skills, feelings about professors in general and about talking to them, the use of everyday words such as see, hear, and walk by professors, and the likely effect of the student on the professor. Students also had a variety of thoughts about themselves and their own behaviors; these were concerned mainly with self-esteem and self-evaluation. Students had few thoughts about their courses, course work, academic performance, or about their classmates.

Professors

The data show that although the majority (64%) of professors preferred that students initiate dialogue, this generally did not occur (only 38% of professors indicated that students initiated dialogue). Furthermore, professors were significantly more comfortable when students approached them (M=9.30, SD=1.18) than when they approached students (M=8.48, SD=1.88), $t(53)=3.51$, $p<.001$.

Means in Table 4 indicate that professors were generally very comfortable in most of the situations in which professors and students with disabilities interact and also that professors were generally satisfied with their actions. As was the case for students, professors were somewhat less comfortable when dealing with students with hearing and speech impairments than when dealing with those who had visual, mobility, or muscular impairments. Professors were least comfortable when a student was failing, especially when the failure was related to the student's disability.

Data on the frequency and effectiveness of actions of professors in each of the nine specific situations are available from the authors. The findings on behaviors and the implications of the results are presented in the Discussion section of this article. Student recommendations about actions professors could take to help are summarized in Table 5. While similar to behaviors noted by professors, these also stress the importance of letting students know that the professor is available to meet with them and the value of discussing potential difficulties without discouraging students from taking the course.

TABLE 4

Mean Comfort Reported by Professors in Various Situations and Mean Satisfaction With Their Actions

Situations	Comfort in the Situation Before Taking Action	Satisfaction After Taking Action to Address Concerns
General Issues		
When one finds out that one has a student with a disability in class	8.24	8.68
When a student with a disability is often absent	8.50	8.07
Use of everyday words related to the student's disability such as *see, hear,* and *walk*	8.78	8.82
Dealing With Students With Different Disabilities		
Talking with mobility or muscular impaired students about course concerns	8.91	8.59
Talking with visually impaired students about course concerns	9.17	8.57
When one is not sure that a hearing impaired student understood what was said	7.95	7.86
When one has difficulty understanding what a student with a speech or hearing impairment is saying	7.27	7.45
Grading Issues		
When a student with a disability is failing because the disability makes course requirements impossible to meet	4.75	7.83
When a student with a disability has failed for reasons unrelated to the disability	6.22	7.88

Note. Higher scores indicate greater comfort or satisfaction. Maximum score = 10.

Two coders were trained to a minimum of 70% interrater agreement on each coded category (i.e., behaviors, thought types, valence). Interrater agreements on six randomly timed spot-checks of reliability on student protocols indicated agreements ranging from 72%–95%, with a mean of 80% for behaviors, 88% for thought type, and 83% for valence; agreements on three random spot-checks on professor protocols indicated agreements ranging from 71%–89%, with a mean of 78% for behaviors, 82% for thought type, and 77% for valence.

RESULTS

Students

When students were asked about their levels of comfort and satisfaction with professors in general, the results show that they were generally quite comfortable (*M*=7.58) and reasonably satisfied with how professors treated them (*M*=7.18). As the means in Table 1 indicate, students with hearing and speech impairments had the lowest comfort and satisfaction scores.

Means in Table 2 indicate that in problematic situations that could require interacting with professors about issues related to one's disability, students generally did not feel as comfortable; they felt particularly uncomfortable when they were failing because a disability made course requirements impossible to meet. When students with different disabilities rated their level of comfort in situations that involved their specific impairments, those with visual, mobility, or muscular impairments felt more comfortable than did students with hearing and speech impairments. Nevertheless, most students were reasonably satisfied *after taking action* to deal with the problem—this usually involved talking to the professor.

Data on the frequency and effectiveness of specific actions taken by students in each of 12 situations are available from the authors. A summary of the findings and their implications are presented in the Discussion section of this article. Professors' suggestions about helpful actions by students were categorized and the percentage of professors who indicated each action was calculated (see Table 3). These recommendations, while similar to those noted by students, also stress the importance of not using the disability as an excuse for poor performance.

Frequency data on the specific types of thoughts students had when they encountered problematic issues and after taking action (which usually involved talking to the professor) are available from the authors. The results indicate that although students had approximately the same number of thoughts before and after doing something to resolve problems, in most situations students had more negative than positive thoughts before

TABLE 3

Recommendations Made by Outstanding Professors About What Students Could Do to Facilitate the Teaching-Learning Process

Approach the professor to discuss course issues—do this after class (46%) or make an appointment (4%).
Inform the professor about the nature of the disability (14%) and discuss how the disability is likely to affect performance and learning in the course (25%).
Talk to the professor early during the semester, before problems become serious (23%). Do not wait until there is a panic situation or until it is too late to solve the problem (5%).
Tell the professor the specific nature of any problems experienced and discuss possible solutions (e.g., extra time for exams, audiotaping needs) (16%).
Let the professor know what you can do (7%) and what you cannot do (7%).
Propose solutions to problems. Tell professors what has worked for you in the past—don't leave them guessing or trying to come up with solutions that may be ineffective (5%).
If you can handle problems by yourself, do so (9%). But do not fail to request assistance when you need it (9%).
Do not use the disability as an excuse (9%).

Note. (%) = % of the 57 professors who stated this recommendation.

TABLE 5

Recommendations Made by Students About What Professors Could Do to Facilitate the Teaching-Learning Process

Be an effective teacher to all students (e.g., make assignments clear, repeat lecture materials if you see puzzled looks, present up-to-date material, face the class while lecturing and speak loudly and clearly, write neatly on the board, be explicit in specifying material to be covered by students, encourage students to ask questions, show a sense of humor) (72%).

Let students know that you are available to meet with them—make it clear that you have the time (47%).

Talk to students about possible course concerns early during the term (3%) and encourage them to stay in touch (23%).

If the student has not approached you, approach the student to find out what accommodations would be helpful and to discuss what the student can and cannot do in terms of meeting course requirements (43%).

Do not delve into the student's medical history or inquire about his or her diagnosis. Stick to information needed about the student's ability to function in your course (3%).

Do not discourage students from taking your course. If you foresee problems, discuss them but let students make their own decisions (36%).

If the student has a hearing or a speech impairment, be patient and take time to communicate effectively. Ask for repetition or clarification if you do not understand. In the case of a hearing impaired student, if you are in doubt, check whether the student understood you (4%).

Make adjustments to allow the student an equal opportunity to learn course material (47%) and remember that identical treatment is not "equal" treatment (48%).

Encourage the student and comment on good work (21%).

Avoid embarrassing students by singling them out for special attention in class (4%).

Make adjustments in evaluating performance by giving students an equal opportunity to demonstrate that they have mastered the course material (31%). Do *not*, however, accept work of a lower quality from students with disabilities and do not give "unearned" marks by assigning a passing grade only because the student tried hard or because you feel sorry for him or her (3%).

Treat the student as you would all other students in situations where the disability is not an issue. Do not overcompensate by doing things for disabled students that they can and want to do on their own (33%).

Note. (%) = % of the 75 students who made the recommendation.

Frequency data on the specific types of thoughts professors had before and after taking action are available from the authors. The results indicate that (a) in all nine situations, professors had relatively few thoughts before taking action and considerably more thoughts afterwards; (b) positive thoughts outnumbered negative ones in all situations; (c) professors' thoughts were considerably more positive after taking action than before doing so in all situations; (d) professors' thoughts were primarily focused on themselves when it came to using everyday words related to the student's disability; and (e) in all other situations professors had few thoughts about the academic characteristics of their students, had more thoughts about themselves and their own behavior, and had many thoughts about the nonacademic characteristics of their students (e.g., the student's credibility, the student's nonacademic competence and independence, their own reactions to the student, the impact of the student on other class members, whether the student was "ok" or "not ok," and their own reactions to student behaviors). Thoughts of professors were least positive, both before and after taking action, in the following specific situations: when they were not sure that a student with a hearing impairment understood what they were saying; when they had problems understanding a student's speech; and when a student with a disability was failing.

DISCUSSION

Student Perspective: General Considerations

The results indicate that students with disabilities were reasonably comfortable with their professors in general. Nevertheless, when they encountered problems or when they had concerns related to their disabilities that required approaching their professors, students were less comfortable and experienced a variety of negative thoughts. The most distressing situations for students occurred when they were failing and when students and professors were having difficulty communicating because they could not understand each other's speech.

Students generally felt good when they were able to handle problems themselves. When they believed it necessary to talk to professors about difficulties with course requirements, however, they frequently felt inadequate and different from other students. They wondered whether they belonged in the course. Most commonly, they had a variety of concerns about their professors—whether they would be helpful and able to treat the student fairly, what the professor thought about the student and the disability, and whether the student would burden the professor. Students also worried that professors would think they were lazy or stupid and

that they were not trying hard enough. For many students, especially for those with nonvisible impairments, the issue of credibility also arose.

> "I don't like to ask for things. I really value my independence. And I worry a lot about how professors will react—if they will be understanding. It's like a Catch-22. I want to ask for help and tell them about my situation, but I don't want them to feel that I'm asking for *special* help. I don't want them to feel that I'm imposing on them. I worry that professors won't be willing to adapt the course for me and that I may not be getting everything out of the course that others were getting."

Nevertheless, most students knew that it is a good idea to talk to their professors and they sometimes encouraged themselves by thinking about how much better they would feel afterwards.

> "I really don't want to be treated differently. But sometimes you just have to ask. It's something I must do. I always feel uncomfortable before asking for help and happy after I go."

In fact, students did feel better after talking to their professors. They reported feeling more at ease with professors and discovered that many of their initial concerns were unfounded. They believed that having initiated dialogue was the appropriate action, talking to professors was helpful, problems were resolved, and they were better able to succeed in the course. It seems that student apprehensions about approaching their professors were not justified and that the experience of talking to professors was not as negative as students had expected.

> "I was a little worried about asking for help, but professors were very willing to assist since I had made the effort. They turned out to be OK and I felt better after I talked to them because then they knew the situation. Together we would find a method for me to complete the assignments without compromising the class standards. I felt very good because my grades improved tremendously as a result. I had no choice but to make it known that I have a problem. Talking to the professor is a necessary process that must be done."

Student responses indicated that when trying to resolve problems by oneself was not sufficient, talking to professors, especially after having thought about what to say, was an effective way of coping with course concerns. Talking to professors early, justifying the need for special consideration, and making concrete and specific requests were all considered effective ways of behaving. Making suggestions about how problems could be solved and putting professors at ease were also rated as effective strategies. Doing nothing was seen as the least effective option available to students.

Student Perspective: Specific Situations

During the first few days of classes. Most students, whether they have a disability or not, feel simultaneously hopeful as well as tense and anxious at the beginning of a term. During the first few days of classes, students in the sample sometimes "checked-out" their professors and their courses to evaluate whether they wanted to stay in the class. If they decided to stay, students usually told their professors that they had a disability. They also talked to their professors about how the disability affected learning in the course as well as about specific course concerns and possible adjustments the professors could make. During such discussions, students were likely to tell professors about their strengths—what they could do—and about their weaknesses—what they could not do. Also, they made suggestions about what professors could do to make learning easier. Most students felt that such discussions are best held early in the semester. Indeed, some students approached their professors well before the start of classes in order to obtain a course outline and to get more information about the class.

Talking to professors outside of class time about course materials, problems, and special consideration. Before approaching their professors, some students tried to handle problems themselves. Depending on the nature of the difficulty, this was sometimes seen as an effective strategy.

Some students in the sample talked to professors only when they felt that they must. Others made it a point to talk to their professors and to keep in touch with them during the semester. Many students talked to their professors during the term to discuss course issues related to their disabilities, specific problems they were encountering, and things the professors could do to help them learn more effectively. Students often planned what they wanted to discuss with professors and, depending on the topic or the time required, saw professors after class, stopped by during office hours, or made an appointment. Also, students believed that it was most effective to see professors before problems became acute instead of waiting until the last minute (e.g., asking for an extension several days before the deadline rather than on the day that the assignment was due).

When a student needs help from classmates. All students need help from their classmates occasionally. Missed classes, sketchy notes, unintelligible handwriting, and obscure lecture points affect almost everyone. Therefore, it was not surprising to find that students usually did not ask professors when they needed help from classmates. Instead, they made their own arrangements. Most students asked classmates themselves. When long-term help such as note taking during the whole semester was involved, students generally consulted staff of the service for students with disabilities.

If some kind of concrete help from classmates was needed that could only be arranged by professors, first formulating the request and thinking about what to ask and only then talking to the professor was seen as the most effective course of action.

When a student notices that the professor is uncomfortable using everyday words related to the disability such as "see," "hear," and "walk." Most students with visual impairments use words such as "see," "vision," and "watch." Students who have a hearing impairment do use words such as "hear," "listen," and "sound." Similarly, words such as "walk" and "run" are often employed by students who use a wheelchair as well as by those who have other mobility impairments. When students noticed that professors were not comfortable using such words, some tried to make professors more comfortable by telling them that they were not bothered or offended by such words and that using the words is normal. Students also indicated that it was quite effective to put professors at ease by joking with them about the words.

A significant number of students who noticed that professors were uncomfortable did not do anything about it. They didn't think about it much and simply accepted the fact that some professors will be uncomfortable. Some students were angered at the professors' discomfort. Nevertheless, most students were aware that doing nothing would not make things any better.

When a student is failing because the disability makes course requirements impossible to meet. Ideally, students who are experiencing difficulties because of their disability should have discussed their concerns with professors well before they find themselves failing. Almost half the students interviewed had been in this situation, which is testimonial to the fact that many students do find themselves failing because their disability makes course requirements impossible to meet.

By the time a student is failing, no single action is likely to be truly effective. At best, it may be possible to obtain a minimum passing grade and avoid the failure. What most students found to be relatively effective in this situation was to talk to professors and discuss the impact of the disability on meeting the course requirements. Planning what to say to professors and proposing ideas about specific things that the student could do to avert the failure were also seen as useful strategies (e.g., a make-up exam or an alternate assignment of equivalent difficulty). If dialogue with professors did not result in a satisfactory resolution of the problem, a few students felt that talking to staff of the service for students with disabilities was helpful. Dropping the course was also seen as a possibility.

When the final grade is a failure but this is not due to the student's disability. For many students, whether they have a disability or not, failing a course is a part of the academic experience. Indeed, almost a third of the students interviewed had failed at least one course, even when the course requirements were not made impossible by their disabilities. A number of these

students indicated that they did not even think of talking to professors about the matter.

Failing a course is a demoralizing and discouraging experience for anyone. Therefore, it is not surprising that some students who failed a course were unhappy but did nothing. Many of the students who found themselves in this predicament, however, did choose to talk to the professor, generally about how the disability affected their performance in the course. Some students talked to professors in order to get the grade changed. Others talked to professors to avoid having them think ill of them or to get feedback regarding their real potential and suitability for academic pursuits in the professor's area of interest. Some students were annoyed with themselves for not having dropped the course earlier or for not trying harder whereas others felt upset and questioned their own academic abilities. They also were concerned about the implications of the failure for their academic standing and worried about the impression their failing grade made on the professor. As in most other situations, those students who elected to talk to their professors felt better afterward.

Concerns of students with different disabilities. Students with different impairments have a variety of specific concerns about being able to succeed in their courses (Moore, Newlon, & Nye, 1986). For example, students with visual impairments may have concerns about exams, handouts, texts, readings, assignments, and audio-visual materials. Students with mobility or muscular impairments may encounter problems with access, attendance, field trips, and libraries as well as with exams and assignments. Students with speech and hearing impairments are likely to have a variety of problems in communicating with their professors, both in and out of class.

Students with different impairments made many valuable suggestions about what could be done to address specific concerns related to their disabilities. These recommendations are too numerous to list here and they have been summarized in a guide for students with disabilities, which is available from the authors (Fichten, Goodrick, Amsel, & Libman, 1989a).

Professor Perspective: General Considerations

The data show that a key characteristic of professors nominated as outstanding by their students with disabilities was their perceived comfort in student-professor interactions. As was the case for students, professors were least comfortable when a student was failing and when students and professors had difficulty communicating with each other because they did not understand what the other was saying. Professors in our sample reported few negative thoughts about their students or about making adjustments to their teaching and evaluation methods. Professors

preferred that contact be initiated by students rather than themselves and they were more comfortable when students initiated. Nevertheless, only a few professors (11%) waited indefinitely for students to approach them. The rest initiated contact if students had not done so, especially when they foresaw problems. This is in marked contrast with data on "average" professors who were found to be particularly reluctant to approach students with disabilities (Amsel & Fichten, 1990). Not surprisingly, professors in the current sample were quite satisfied with their actions and felt quite positive about their efforts to teach students with disabilities effectively.

Professors considered outstanding by their students with disabilities took an active role by engaging their students in dialogue, discussing how problems could be resolved, and talking about how they might help students to succeed. Perceived effective strategies included keeping in touch with students and making accommodations in teaching style as well as in evaluation techniques. Passing students merely because they tried hard or because the professor felt sorry for them was not considered effective.

Professor Perspective: Specific Situations

When professors found out about the presence of a student with a disability in one of their classes. Some professors were enthusiastic and optimistic when they first found out that they would be teaching a student with a disability. Most, however, were somewhat dismayed; they worried about how to talk to the student, wondered if they would be able to teach the student effectively, and were concerned about the impact of the student with a disability on the rest of the class. Many were also concerned about the extra time and work involved.

Nevertheless, most professors made sure that they spoke to students early in the semester. For example, during the first day of classes some professors simply issued an invitation to *all* students (e.g., "If anyone has any concerns or issues about the course that they want to discuss, talk to me after class or come see me in my office"). This legitimizes the principle that it is acceptable to talk to professors. If students did not approach professors even after such an invitation, professors usually approached the student to initiate contact—they did not wait indefinitely for the student to make the first move.

Professors generally discussed with students how disabilities were likely to affect student performance in the course, tried to identify potential problems and solutions, and discussed what would be helpful in terms of adjustments to lectures, course materials, evaluation, and grading.

After talking to students, professors' thinking was generally much more positive about the prospect of teaching them. Professors were satisfied with having discussed problematic issues and felt more optimistic once they knew what actions would be helpful. Also, professors felt more confident that students would be able to cope with the course.

If a student was absent often. When professors had reason to believe that students may have had legitimate reasons for frequent absences, most approached students to talk about the problem if students had not already done so. When they felt that the situation warranted, some professors evaluated student performance differently from that of others. Other professors treated the student like any other student and a few professors made no accommodations whatsoever.

After talking to students or adjusting the evaluation scheme, most professors felt good and believed that they had done the right thing. Professors who made no accommodation rated this to be relatively ineffective.

Use of everyday words related to a disability. Many words used in everyday conversation can relate to a student's disability. Do you *see* my point? The poet had a *vision*. I'll *see* you after class. Let's *walk* to my office to discuss things. I *heard* that the exam was difficult. *Listen* to me.

When talking to someone with a disability, people often feel self-conscious about using such words. In some situations they catch themselves midsentence and this, too, can feel awkward. Although many professors in the sample simply didn't think about whether they should use such words, others had to adjust. But most professors did use such everyday words and the few who did not believed such avoidance to be ineffective.

When a student with a disability was failing. Some students with disabilities cannot complete the course in the same manner as nondisabled students because their impairment makes it impossible for them to meet the course requirements. Others obtain failing grades for the same reasons as nondisabled students (e.g., poor preparation, inability to understand the work, lack of effort, poor literacy skills). Professor concerns were different, depending on the cause of failure.

When students were failing because the disability made it impossible for them to meet requirements, professors usually evaluated whether the requirements were essential to demonstrate mastery of the course or not, and based any further action on this factor. If the problematic requirement was not essential, most professors adjusted their grading system to allow students to demonstrate what they knew (it should be noted that this practice is not the same as simply waiving a requirement or accepting work of a lower quality; rather, the requirement is replaced with one of equivalent importance and level of difficulty). Often, this was done before a failure occurred. For example, students with a speech impairment may have been allowed to replace an oral presentation with a written

equivalent or to audiotape a presentation if the anxiety of standing in front of a class would have made the student's speech impairment worse.

Most professors who made adjustments in their grading schemes felt good afterwards, both about their own way of handling the problem as well as about the student. When professors allowed the failure to stand, this was usually because they believed that tasks the student could not do constituted essential components of the course. Nevertheless, they felt distressed when students failed because the disability made it impossible for them to succeed.

When students with disabilities were failing for the "usual" reasons, the situation was very different. Here, professors were concerned about the impact of failure on student motivation to continue in higher education and about the consequences of failure on the student's future and self-esteem. In this situation some professors pitied students, particularly if they had obviously tried hard to master the materials but were simply not able to do so. Nevertheless, in this situation professors generally followed their usual course of action. Some spoke to students about the causes of failure. Others simply posted the grades. Although professors felt particularly unhappy in this situation, only rarely did they add the needed marks to allow a student to pass.

Some professors had come to terms with failing a student with a disability. Many had not; as one professor stated, "It took a lengthy conversation with our coordinator of services for students with disabilities for me to realize that students with disabilities also have the right to fail." Generally, professors who chose to talk to their students about the failure felt somewhat better afterwards.

Teaching students with different disabilities. During the term, many professors made an effort to keep in touch with their students who had disabilities by asking them how things were going and by inviting students to see them if they encountered problems. They made time to see their students and made sure that students were aware that such contact was not an imposition. Some professors also made it a point not to embarrass students by singling them out for special attention in class. In most other respects, professors generally treated students with disabilities as they treated any other student.

Professors also noted a variety of concrete things that they did when teaching students with specific disabilities. Too numerous and detailed to describe here, these are summarized in a guide for professors that is available from the authors (Fichten, Goodrick, Amsel, & Libman, 1989b). The manual of recommendations, based on this research, provides concrete suggestions about what kinds of behaviors are likely to enhance the teaching-learning process. These could help college professionals troubleshoot specific problems between students who have disabilities and the professors who teach them.

Implications for Rehabilitation Professionals

It is important for rehabilitation professionals who work with students to recognize that some students with disabilities feel "different"; they believe that it is only *they* who are confused and troubled by needing special consideration from professors. Of course, students with and without disabilities often find themselves in similar predicaments. Both this research and the personal experiences of the researchers as students, teachers, counselors, and psychologists converge on one theme—all students need special consideration at some time in their academic careers. When this happens, students, whether they have a disability or not, feel tense and uncomfortable. What is also abundantly clear is that when students need assistance, they feel more positive about themselves, their professors, and their chances of doing well *after* discussing problems with their professors.

To help students obtain necessary special considerations from their professors, counselors and student services professionals need to be aware of student thoughts and feelings about approaching professors. In order to succeed in college, most students with disabilities must overcome their reluctance to seek out special treatment.

Professors often feel uncomfortable approaching students with disabilities and prefer that students initiate dialogue. The style of the request is particularly important. Professors are more likely to provide the assistance needed when students state their needs in a precise and articulate manner. As suggested by others (e.g., Farbman, 1983; Ragosta, 1987), the current findings confirm that students with disabilities are best served by providing them with social and negotiation skills that enable them to interact effectively with their professors. Teaching students such skills is likely to enhance comfort and feelings of self-efficacy, make students more likely to approach their professors and, thereby, resolve course problems, get on with the work required to master course material, and succeed in higher education.

Rehabilitation professionals who work in colleges are often sought out by professors who have not had much experience teaching students with disabilities. These professors are likely to have a variety of concerns about the ability of students to succeed, the impact of the student on the rest of the class, as well as their own effectiveness in teaching students with special needs.

First, it is important to note that most accommodations professors make to help students with disabilities succeed are also beneficial for nondisabled students. For example, all students profit from lectures that are audible, clear, and well organized; from readings and assignments that are specified early; and from flexibility with the format and content of assignments and exams. Second, findings of the current study suggest

that when professors are uncertain about how to cope with a particular problem, the best advice is, "Talk to the student about it." Although many professors are reluctant to make the first move, students with disabilities generally have no objection to being approached. If students do not initiate contact, then professors should. Expressing uncertainty about the best course of action is not pejorative for either professors or students. When both parties are baffled, trial-and-error with dialogue, good intentions, and good faith on both sides usually carry professors and students through. The findings show that open and honest communication between professors and students is the most effective way to resolve teaching and learning problems and get on with the work of educating all students in the most effective way possible. The challenge to professionals who advise professors and students is to facilitate such dialogue by helping them overcome their reluctance and discomfort and by guiding them in taking the first steps.

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