

Covid-19's Impact on Learning Accommodations



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It's hard to generalize about how the Covid-19 pandemic affected students with disabilities — the isolation that may have frustrated students with learning disabilities and attention-deficit disorders, for example, may have been viewed as liberating by some students with autism-spectrum disorders.

One silver lining — the pandemic may result in greater empathy for students with disabilities. During the crisis, nearly all college students needed accommo-

dations, ranging from remote classes to continue to progress toward a degree, to the use of masks when in-class instruction resumed. As colleges and universities move toward the first “normal” semester in 18 months this fall, students with disabilities and their advocates hope the Covid experience endured by all prompts campus leaders and professors to be more accepting of ideas and approaches that might improve the educational experience for all students.

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Remote instruction

One hot topic — analyzed in two recent webinars by the Association on Higher Education and Disability (Ahead) — is whether colleges will continue to offer remote instruction to students with disabilities. Students with severe physical disabilities or chronic health conditions often prefer remote instruction because they can learn without the physical struggle of making it to class, but requests for remote learning were routinely rejected by many universities prior to the pandemic.

Those rejections stem from arguments by professors that in-class participation is an essential part of the course. Calling such requests “unreasonable” will be a tougher sell now, after colleges have proved that remote instruction can work just fine, says Amanda Kraus, executive director of disability resources at the University of Arizona, and the current Ahead president. Advocates for students with disabilities will also be closely watching how universities handle international students who can’t get to campus due to travel restrictions. Why should a student with depression so severe that she can’t get out of bed be denied the chance to study remotely if an international student is offered that opportunity?

Jamie Axelrod, director of disability resources at Northern Arizona University, says he expects an increasing number of the complaints filed with the Education Department’s Office for Civil Rights to cite higher education’s successes in providing remote instruction during the pandemic. L. Scott Lissner, the Americans With Disabilities Act coordinator at Ohio State University, agrees that universities will have a more difficult time arguing that providing remote instruction creates an unfair administrative burden. Before Covid, he says, Ohio State had a “tiny digital-

construction footprint” — with perhaps four classrooms outfitted with cameras to deliver remote courses. Now, 400 classrooms have cameras and they work a lot better, he says, so it will be harder to argue that such requests aren’t feasible.

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Accidental universal design

For more than decade, disability-services administrators have been arguing for “universal design” — courses that are accessible to anyone without the need for any special adaptations or accommodations. During the pandemic, many professors stumbled on “accidental universal design” out of necessity, says Kirsten Behling, associate dean for student accessibility and academic resources at Tufts University.

A professor might embrace the chat function on a videoconferencing tool — empowering all students to ask questions, but especially those with anxiety disorders who don’t feel comfortable speaking up in an in-person class. Another professor might notice that her 90-minute recorded lectures are lightly watched; by breaking the video into 10-minute “topics,” all students can digest the information more easily. That approach also greatly helps students with attention-deficit disorders — by creating “chunks” of lecture material, the professor allows students to go back over missed material at their leisure.

Disability advocates have long urged professors to allow students to use “multiple means” to demonstrate mastery of course material, rather than relying heavily on timed exams. With the explosion in remote instruction, that argument has gained greater sway, especially amid concerns about student privacy and increased test anxiety when universities rely on online proctoring of timed exams.

The growing appreciation for universal design may also reduce the number of disputes that disability-services offices must mediate. Ian Kunkes, director of student accessibility and educational opportunity at Virginia Commonwealth University, says a large number of upperclassmen and graduate students at VCU initially indicated that they wanted a “virtual option” to complete a specific course or degree track. But many of those requests were later abandoned, he says, as those students gained comfort that instructors would use universal-design concepts for in-person courses.

Likewise, Catholic University discovered in a survey of students that many of the problems they encountered during the pandemic could be solved by having more professors embrace universal design. Sarah Young, assistant director of disability services, says her office is now working with another unit on campus, the Center for Teaching Excellence, to help professors include those concepts when designing courses.

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New challenges

Even as disability-services offices advocate for a better experience for existing students, they’re bracing for an increase in the number of students seeking assistance. Sufferers of so-called “long Covid” have symptoms that can last for months, and can include heart palpitations, depression or anxiety, and difficulty concentrating. Enjie Hall, director of campus accessibility and student disability services at the University of Toledo, says her office will provide temporary accommodations to assist most students with long Covid — much as it would for someone who needs months to recover from a concussion. But those accommodations could become permanent if the medical community determines long-Covid symptoms are likely to be chronic.

Universities will need to decide how much they will intervene on behalf of students with autoimmune disorders. Some disorders may limit the effectiveness of Covid vaccines, says Krista Soria, a research associate with the University of California at Berkeley’s Center for Studies in Higher Education, which makes it important for other students in a class to wear masks. Soria says she’s heard several anecdotal reports about universities that are leaving it up to the immunocompromised student to ask other students to wear masks. Soria worries about the stress and potential backlash such students will face, as well as medical-privacy issues raised by asking students to disclose a disability publicly.

Colleges will also have to evaluate new requests for accommodations due to anxiety related to the pandemic, or due to agoraphobia after more than a year of isolation. At Ohio State, the disability-services office wants to hear from the student requesting an accommodation, but also from the student’s health-care provider. The form asks physicians if they support remote participation for the student, and, if so, when a return to in-person instruction might be possible,

says Adam Crawford, OSU's assistant director of disability services. If the disability is related to anxiety, Ohio State wants to know how the student's level of anxiety rises beyond that experienced by nearly everyone else over the past 18 months, and if such anxiety could lead to hospitalization.

Technology

Advances in technology continue to improve the experience for students with disabilities — as long as faculty members remember to incorporate the new tools. The auto-captioning features in videoconferencing and presentation programs have greatly improved, a boon for hard of hearing and deaf students. The technology has improved so much that Northern Arizona's Axelrod envisions a day when his institution might save as much as half of the \$300,000 per year it now pays humans for real-time captioning.

At the University of Toledo, the provost announced that all classes would be recorded, and the university negotiated a contract last year that provides unlimited auto captioning for the recordings on its learning-management system.

But Soria, the research associate, says that Toledo is hardly the norm; in fact, many of the technological improvements that students with disabilities enjoyed during the pandemic may decline as universities return to normal operations. As instructors give up videoconferencing for in-person instruction, the number of recorded lectures is expected to drop. Captioning may also be used less. Soria teaches at the University of Minnesota, Augsburg

University, and the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse, but only Minnesota provides her with a captioning option, she says.

Market opportunity

The hand-wringing about how well universities are serving their existing students may be obscuring a longer-term trend — roughly 20 percent of the undergraduate student population today has a disability, and universities who meet their needs may thrive while other institutions fail.

With overall enrollment in higher education declining, some universities are likely to seize a “market opportunity” by providing a remote synchronous experience to students who want it, says Northern Arizona's Axelrod. Michael R. Masinter, an emeritus law professor at Nova Southeastern University, says that the technologies enabling in-person and remote instruction simultaneously — such as HyFlex — will continue to get better over time, and colleges will offer more such courses as students demand them. “Old-fashioned economics will play a role,” Masinter says.

Landmark College offers one example. The college, established 36 years ago to serve students with learning disabilities, is rolling out a new one-year online program, called College START, to help first-year students with a learning disability, ADHD, or autism “develop learning strategies and build the skills needed to grow strengths in and out of the classroom setting.”

Now that students with disabilities have learned that remote instruction can work well, they're likely to demand more of it. Expect many more institutions to follow Landmark's lead.

“Covid-19's Impact on Learning Accommodations” was produced by Chronicle Intelligence. Please contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.