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## How inclusive and accessible is your statement on Inclusion and accessibility?

Submitted by Freya Möbus on October 30, 2020 - 3:00am

As I was preparing for this new semester, I found myself copying and pasting the statement on inclusion and accessibility from my previous syllabi. I had spent some time on editing the course description, contemplating the desired learning outcomes and comparing forms of assessment. But when it came to the statement on inclusion and accessibility, I hadn't thought much about what I want to communicate to my students.

It seems it's not just me. For, despite some excellent existing resources on this topic, the parts of our syllabi devoted to inclusion and accessibility remain somewhat, well, exclusive and inaccessible.

Take, for instance, the first couple of lines of this statement: "The university is committed to upholding all aspects of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973." If you didn't fully understand this sentence, it is unlikely that your students will.

But even without all the legal language, statements may feel mechanical and impersonal. Take the following one: "In accordance with federal law, if you have a documented disability, you may be eligible to request accommodations. Any requests will be reviewed in a timely manner to determine their appropriateness to this setting. If you have a documented learning difficulty which may entitle you to reasonable accommodations, please contact Disability Services to initiate an assessment as early as possible in the term."

Put yourself in the shoes of a student whose learning is affected by some condition -- visible or invisible, physical or psychological, rare or common. Would this statement make you feel academically at home? I believe that we

can improve our statements on inclusion and accessibility in three respects: language, tone and scope.

**Language.** We want our students to feel comfortable reaching out to us and accessing the services provided by their institution. (They're paying for it, after all.) A great way to make someone feel uncomfortable and less likely to reach out is by making them feel ignorant. If the statement reads like a law document and students don't understand it (what exactly is in section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, anyway?), we build linguistic barriers and thus risk adding to feelings of discomfort and insecurity. Let's thus avoid overly legal, inaccessible language. We want to break down barriers, not build more.

**Tone.** If students successfully navigate the legal landscape of the institution, their request will then be "reviewed," and it will be "assessed" whether their request is "reasonable" and "appropriate." The tone suggests that our students should prepare themselves for some scrutiny. To some, those lines might even sound borderline accusatory. The assumption seems to be that the student's accommodation request -- their idea of how they learn best -- might be unreasonable or inappropriate. I believe that this sends the wrong message and can function as a deterrent. Instead, let's assume that our students want to do well in our class and that they have some idea of how they learn best.

I often wonder who determines the norms of learning, anyway. Who decides what's "reasonable" and "appropriate"? Who decided, for example, that we learn best being confined to chairs and sitting still for an extended period of time? In ancient Athens, Aristotle's students learned while walking. This practice was so characteristic of Aristotle that his school came to be known as the *Peripatos*, named after the covered walkways (the *peripatoi*) where the members met. Sure, some ideas about how to alter the learning environment are impractical. But some alterations, such as standing desks or walking meetings, seem quite feasible.

**Scope.** The statement above implies that unless our students' learning preferences are tied to a "documented learning difficulty" or "disability," they don't warrant accommodation. This excludes all those students who would benefit from an altered learning environment but who do not have a disability that gives them a (legal) basis to ask for it. I suggest that we significantly

broaden the scope of the statement. Let's make the statement on inclusion more inclusive.

I'm thinking of students who learn better when they move, or who feel more comfortable meeting with the instructor in a public space instead of in private offices. I'm also thinking of those who come to class without the text, not because they didn't care to purchase the book but because they cannot afford it, or those who have to miss classes to take care of their child or to attend parole appointments.

Whether or not any of these examples are likely to apply to our individual students is relatively unimportant. The crucial point is to make students feel like they are not alone. Instead of planting the idea that certain personal circumstances and ways of learning are somehow abnormal, we should normalize that we all face different obstacles in the classroom. The point is also to foster empathy: "Look to your left; look to your right. You don't know what's going on in this person's life. Try to be understanding."

Being empathetic is perfectly compatible with maintaining a rigorous, challenging learning environment. Our students might face similar (or even different) challenges after they graduate. Thus, instead of lowering our expectations by removing challenges (e.g., meeting deadlines), we should help students meet our expectations and take ownership of their learning by facing their obstacles and trying to overcome them as best as possible.

Which statement works best on your syllabus depends on who you are as an instructor and your voice in the classroom. Maybe you can identify with the following one. It's a fusion of statements I found in an [article by Zoe Wool](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, "Check Your Syllabus 101: Disability Access Statements."

This course is intended for all students, including those with mental or physical disabilities, illness, injuries, impairments, or any other condition that tends to negatively affect one's equal access to education. If, at any point in the term, you find yourself not able to fully access the space, content, and experience of this course, you are welcome (but not required) to contact me. It is never too late to request accommodations -- our bodies and circumstances are

continuously changing. I also encourage you to contact Disability Services. By making a plan through DS, you can ensure accommodation without disclosing your condition to course instructors.

Here's my current statement:

Can you not see or hear very well? Is English your second or third language? Do you have to miss class because of work, childcare, or parole appointments? Is money tight and you can't afford books or a laptop right now? Can you concentrate better if you stand or walk around in class? If, at any point in the semester, a disability or personal circumstances affect your learning in this course, please feel free to reach out to me. I am committed to helping you succeed in this class. For excellent services and resources on physical, mental and social well-being, visit our on-campus Wellness Center. If you have a documented condition (physical or psychological), consider registering with the Student Accessibility Center (SAC). Neither the SAC nor the Wellness Center will disclose your condition to your instructors.

It's a work in progress, but better than the version I copied and pasted last semester.

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**Links**

[1] <https://anthrodendum.org/2018/08/13/check-your-syllabus-101-disability-access-statements/>

