

Addressing Student Needs through Individual Accommodations

Shakespeare's Hamlet famously decries, "When sorrows come, they come not single spies. But in battalions!" This describes well one aspect of the human condition we encounter in teaching with each new term. Our students face many sorrows of a variety of types (e.g. illness, injury, death of a loved one, campus trauma, loss of a job, natural disaster, etc.) and also with more than one at once as they also try to navigate learning in our courses. Often, their class attendance, ability to complete assignments, and more are diminished in these times, creating another area of stress and anxiety during a time when (and, indeed, because) they are already suffering. As instructors, our challenge is that it is rarely only one student in our class who is in some form of crisis. We are asked to address the circumstances of multiple students encountering a variety of issues.

While we may be in no position to help our students navigate physical and psychological sorrows, there are ways we can support them by addressing their pedagogical needs. Depending on the form and severity of the challenges students face and the timing in the academic term, we can create paths for them to learn new content and skills, complete activities and projects, connect with their classmates, take exams, etc. Categorizing situations as: emergency; non-emergency, short-term; or non-emergency, long-term can be helpful in navigating the range of possible supports to create and offer.

Below are some beginning steps an instructor can take to support students who may be in one form of crisis or another.

All Categories

Before determining the category of support you can give students, it is most helpful if we begin by acknowledging the difficulty of the challenge(s) the student is facing, expressing concern for the student's well-being, and ensuring that they are connected to the appropriate supports beyond us as instructors (e.g. medical personnel, counselors, title IX coordinator, financial aid, dean of students). Until students are in a position of safety and have their basic needs met, they will not be able to engage effectively in any pedagogical intervention we create. Knowing that you care for their well-being first can help students see you as part of their team of professionals who will help them navigate through their difficulties rather than as an additional stress in troubled times.

If a campus-wide trauma or natural disaster has occurred, consider addressing the whole class at once and allowing for the group to connect. ([See also: Responding to Tragic Events](#))

Emergency Situations

Emergency situations are by nature those that need immediate action. Either because the situation has arisen at the very end of the term, or because the situation itself is dire, emergency supports in a class are those that create space for students to get immediate attention, but do not necessarily preserve the potential for a certain grade. Emergency pedagogical responses can include: waiving an exam or assignment, allowing for individual completion of a group project, creating a plan for a grade of incomplete, or encouraging an official withdraw from a course.

Non-Emergency, Short-Term Situations

When situations arise that have clear end-points during the semester, students need accommodations for a few days to a couple of weeks.

Changes to Attendance or Participation

Students may need to miss more than the allotted number of classes in order to attend to family obligations after a death of an elderly loved one or might need to attend a couple of appointments for medical care after an illness or accident. These circumstances might allow for additional assignments, such as a reading journal, short response paper, creation of exam questions, or short video demonstration to make up for the missing classes.

Students may be able to attend class, but may not be able to participate in-class in the same way as others because of illness, injury, or other issue. Consider if giving alternative ways of participating in class activities such as the option of working in groups or as individuals, the option of moving around the room or not, or choosing to write out responses, use clickers, or to speak.

Changes to Assignments, Projects, and Exams

When a student needs an accommodation for an assignment, project, or exam, we often think of changing the due date or giving an alternative exam. While these are certainly viable options, they are not the only kind of accommodation we can make. For instance, the format of a project can change from group to individual (or vice versa). An exam can be changed to take-home or oral. Assignments can be written, video, or audio. Projects, exams, and assignments can also be broken up into different parts to be completed at different times and/or in different formats. Having a larger menu of options allows us to respond to individual students in the most equitable ways possible, while also maintaining the kind and level of learning students need in order to continue in the course after their short-term accommodation.

Long-Term, Non-Emergency Situations

When students experience a trauma, severe injury, or long-term illness, they may need accommodations that span several weeks, or most of an academic term. These

situations often need a larger plan of action and set of understandings. They may also need agreement between the instructor and student, and also require notifying the department chair, academic advisor, and dean of students. Depending on the exact combination of issues a student is facing, a long-term situation may require that a plan is made only with the intention that a student is able to earn a passing grade, and continue progressing in their program of study without interruption. These plans are made with the understanding that a grade above passing will not be possible.

Such a plan may include: specific types of participation, more or fewer assignments, projects, and exams, working in groups or as an individual, change in format of assignments, projects, and exams, as well as a set of meetings with the instructor and/or teaching assistant. These agreements may also include stipulations about minimum standards of quality or frequency.

Identifying the type of situation a student is facing and addressing with the pedagogical accommodation most appropriate to the situation and the student's need creates ways for us to act as a community of support and care while also continuing to create opportunities for learning in our classes.

*None of these plans are without some additional commitments of time, intellect, and emotion on the part of the instructor as well. Looking for options that address the student need while alleviating some of the additional burden on instructors are the ideal ways of meeting this need. We encourage you to discuss options with someone on the Reinert Center to assist in working toward this ideal.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at ctl@slu.edu.