



Determining Essential Requirements for Courses and Programs

Accommodation guidance adapted from the Office of Accessible Education at Stanford University

An accommodation is a change that aids a student to work around their disability to produce the same level of work as other students in a course. Accommodations are not modifications to content or rigor. The process of determining whether a requested accommodation would **fundamentally alter** an essential requirement of a course is generally determined on a case-by-case basis, collaborative, and fact specific. The following general discussion may be helpful to illustrate some of the relevant considerations.

Essential Requirements Defined

Essential requirements are the outcomes (including skills, knowledge, and attitudes) all students must demonstrate with or without using accommodations.

Some students might use accommodations, and some might not, but all students must achieve the same outcomes. The process is important, of course, but not necessarily essential. Focusing on course outcomes and learning objectives will help instructors to define the course's essential requirements.

Essential vs. Non-essential Requirements

The difference between essential and non-essential requirements is similar to the difference between "essential" and "preferred" skills listed in job descriptions. An employer may want to see both sets of skills, but only the essential skills are an absolute requirement of employment.

Similarly, in courses, instructors can articulate essential outcomes that all students must demonstrate in order to successfully complete the course, as well as preferred outcomes they hope students will be able to demonstrate.

Determining Essential Requirements of Courses

To determine the essential requirements of a course, consider the following:

- What is the purpose of the course?
- Are there pre-existing abilities or skills all participating students must possess?
- What other knowledge or background is assumed?
- What outcomes are absolutely required of all students in the course, with or without accommodations?
- What teaching strategies most effectively address the essential outcomes?
- What methods of instruction are non-negotiable?

Once instructors have determined the essential course requirements, they should be able to:

- Articulate the overall purpose of the course
- Identify what skills, knowledge, principles, and concepts in a course must be mastered and demonstrated by all students
- Treat all students fairly
- Convey the framework used to set academic and program standards to Accommodation & Disability Services
- Assist in determining reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities

Consider Flexibility in Instructional Methods or Assessment

Methods of instruction and assessment can be examined to determine how information is taught and what alternative opportunities are available for teaching and learning the information, format of materials, skills, etc.

Flexibility in achieving outcomes may or may not be appropriate depending on the nature of the course and its requirements, as the following examples illustrate.

Scenario #1

A student with a psychological disorder asks to give a required oral presentation in a sociology course to the instructor in private rather than to the entire class. The accommodation is approved since the essential requirement remains, which is the presentation itself.

This same student requests identical accommodation in an oral communication class where giving speeches is required. The accommodation in this instance is denied because the fundamental requirement of delivering a speech publicly is essential to the course's objective or learning outcome.

Scenario #2

A student with a learning disability is taking a writing course and asks to use a computer and spellchecker for the in-class final exam. This accommodation is approved because the instructor's grading rubric does not focus on accurate spelling as the most important element in the essay.

Scenario #3

A nursing student who has the use of only one hand requests a change in the procedure to start an IV. This accommodation is granted because the student is able to demonstrate proficiency in starting the IV as required by law and/or licensing requirements, although they are using a different procedure to achieve this outcome.

Collaboration

Determining what accommodations are appropriate is most effectively accomplished through collaboration.

- Faculty bring knowledge of the course content, methods, and essential requirements;
- Accommodation & Disability Services staff understand what accommodations are possible;
- Students understand their own limitations and how their disability impacts learning in a classroom.

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