

Supporting the Move from In-Person to Online Classes: Access Considerations

As colleges and universities move their classes online in response to the Coronavirus (COVID-19), the landscape for ensuring access for disabled students is changing. In support of disability resource professionals, AHEAD offers the following thoughts and resources to the other excellent information being developed and shared.

Collaborate:

- **Ensure that you are at the table** as transition plans are made and implemented. In meetings, listen for plans that might differentially impact disabled students, raise them for discussion, and offer assistance. While your role will be collaborative and supportive of this change overall, the unique strength you bring is to make sure accessibility is not overlooked.
- **Think through questions you need to ask and answer:** What information do you need to answer the questions you will be asked? This list will vary by campus but likely include knowing what tools your campus is using, how long courses will be online, what the support is available to students and faculty, and how policies will be modified during this time. Think through the questions you will be asked and check with on and off campus resources, so you are prepared with answers.
- **Work with campus technical support on the resources a student using assistive technology might need.** Your technical support staff may not be used to handling questions related to online course study and assistive technology. Point them to the help sites of commonly used tools and be prepared to answer questions about how best to support students.

Communicate (see samples at the end of this document):

- **Invite students to talk with you about any accessibility concerns** they have and reinforce their right to accommodation. Discuss possible changes to the accommodations they usually use in an online environment. Develop a plan and communicate it widely so students know what to expect.
- **Ensure that faculty members know your office is still available to support accessibility.** Consider sending out a faculty-wide message with general information on access.
- **Outreach to academic and student affairs colleagues** to ensure that they know you are available and are prepared to work effectively with all students who might be anxious about the change from in-person to online courses. Don't try to be everything to everyone; use campus offices established to address other issues, such as the counseling center and teaching/learning office.

Provide Resources:

- **Offer flexibility to both students and faculty:** Faculty are going to be just as concerned about how to implement accommodations during this time as students. Try to anticipate their

concerns and understand that deadlines and other procedures might have to be modified as everyone adjusts to the current situation.

- **Refer students to the campus learning center to support them in transitioning to online classes.** Online study is not for everyone. Some students are going to struggle with the loss of structure that has been supported by in-class meetings. Resources are available to help students in this transition and support them in approaching the work and managing their time.
- **Provide guidelines to faculty about creating accessible online classes and considering alternative assignments when assignments can't be made accessible:** Not every tool and product that supports online learning is fully accessible, especially if your campus has not previously offered online courses. Help faculty understand how to think about alternative assignments that offer students the ability to meet class learning objectives without requiring them to use inaccessible tools or content.

Develop Plans for Providing Accommodations in the Online Environment:

- **Test accommodations**
 - Most learning management systems (LMS) have an option for setting extended test time. Work with the online support/technology staff to be sure that information is readily available to faculty and that you know how to describe it to faculty simply.
 - Have a plan for students to take paper-and-pencil tests if the online test cannot be made accessible.
- **Note-taking**
 - Depending on the design of the online class, notes may or may not be necessary for students who would request them for in-person classes. Talk with the instructor about the course design and the resources provided and explain to students how their accessibility needs will be met.
- **Accessible instructional materials**
 - All texts posted for online classes should be accessible to screen readers and other assistive technologies. However, faculty new to the format may not be aware of how to create accessible materials.
 - Reach out to your online/technology support staff to ensure they know how to support faculty in remediating PowerPoint slides, Word files, and email. Direct staff and faculty to WebAIM resources <https://webaim.org/>
- **Interpreting/CART**
 - If a deaf or hard of hearing student is in the class, use your current resources or contract with one of the numerous companies that provide remote real-time captioning or remote interpreting. Contact your local AHEAD Affiliate or use AHEAD's Communities for recommendations. **USG schools may contact CIDI (formerly AMAC)* <https://cidi.gatech.edu/>*
 - While captioning of all online content is recommended, during this hectic time, concentrate on providing captioning for classes in which a deaf or hard of hearing student is enrolled.
- **Flexibility in attendance and assignment deadlines**
 - Revisit these accommodations as students transition to online classes. These rare accommodations are based on the design of the class and will need to be reconsidered

as the class changes formats. Use the same strategies to determine reasonableness that you used for the in-class decision and be sure to communicate with both the faculty member and the student.

Take care of yourself and your staff:

- **Brainstorm ways to increase time on your schedule to meet student and faculty demands.** Calls, email, and visit volume to your office may increase during the transition. Talk with administration and colleagues about collaborating to handle increased demand. Consider drop-in hours and referrals so your time is spent on issues of access.
- **BREATHE.** There is a lot to do and to take-in during the quick pivots that will be necessary, especially on campuses not currently offering online courses. No one expects you to have all the answers. Turn to campus, local, and national colleagues for support and motivation.

What Happens Next:

- **Reflect on the transition** with your collaborators and determine what went well and what you could have done better. Look internally within your office with these questions as well. Are there policies or other considerations that need to be addressed now that the crisis is over? This can include the adoption and awareness building of universal design and accessibility in online environments.

Compiled Resources

[20 Tips of Teaching an Accessible Online Course \(Website with link to PDF\)](#) *from DO-IT*

[30 Web Accessibility Tips](#) *from DO-IT*

[EDUCAUSE COVID-19 Website with Resources](#) *from EDUCAUSE*

[Explore Access: Tools for Promoting Disability Access and Inclusion](#)

[Keep Teaching: Maintain Course Continuity During Temporary Closures](#) *from The University of North Carolina Chapel Hill*

[Please Do a Bad Job of Putting Your Course Online \(Article\)](#)

[WebAIM for Digital Accessibility Information \(Website\)](#) *from WebAIM*

Sample Emails to Send to Faculty, Students, and Campus Partners

Instructors:

Dear Instructor,

As we prepare to transition from in-person to online instruction, we wanted to remind you that *[your office]* is still available to support you in ensuring that your course remains fully accessible to students with disabilities.

The staff from *[online office]*, who are supporting faculty through this transition, will have tools and suggestions for making your online content accessible. If you've not already contacted them, you may want to reach them at *[online office email and phone number]*.

We know, that no matter how well designed an academic experience is, accommodations may still be necessary. If you have students in your classes who have been using accommodations, those accommodations should still be available to them. For example:

- Extended test time: work with *[office name]* to learn how to set extended test time within the LMS for any exams you are giving online
- Interpreting/CART: If you have a deaf student in your class, all audio or video material you plan to use will need to be captioned. Please contact us if you need assistance.
- Note-taking- If you will be lecturing, a note-taker for may still be necessary.

Disability Resources has contacted all students to let them know they should expect their accommodations to be in place. If you are asked by students and need support in replying to their concerns, please be in touch.

Students:

Dear Students,

As classes transition from in-person to online, you are still entitled to full access. Accommodations you used in your in-person classes might look different or, in some cases, not be necessary now, but you should expect full access. For example,

- If you use extended test time, online test platforms can be set to provide you the extra time.
- If you use technology to read print, it should be compatible with materials posted for your classes.
- If you use interpreting or captioning, you should expect all audio and video material to be captioned.

If you have concerns about access during this transition, please be in touch. We can discuss existing accommodations and any other accommodations you feel will be necessary in online classes. We are

working with administrators, technology staff, and faculty to ensure the transition is as seamless for you as possible.

Colleagues:

Dear Colleagues,

As we transition to online classes, we wanted to be in touch. While we are working with students who use accommodations and their faculty to ensure accessible online experiences, we recognize that, like all students, students with disabilities may experience increased stress during this time. If we can be helpful as you engage with students, both those with known disabilities and those who may be having experiences that would necessitate accommodations, please be contact us at *[phone number and email]*.

We always appreciate working with you and know that our partnership will be especially important during this unprecedented time.