**Students with Disabilities and Learning Accommodations Best Practices Draft**

**I. Make learning accommodations a priority and part of a broader commitment to inclusivity.**

Have a statement on the syllabus explaining procedures for establishing learning accommodations and providing relevant information.

Provide clear information about services available to students, particularly Student Disability Services, Counseling Center, Drake International, and the Office of the Associate Provost for Equity and Inclusion.

Supplement your syllabus statement with a statement expressing your personal commitment to fostering an inclusive learning environment for all students.

Invite students to meet with you to talk about learning styles and any accommodation needs or course concerns.

Consider administering an online survey that *all* students complete before the course begins, where they answer questions about learning styles, accommodations, and course concerns. Incorporate student responses into your course design.

**II. Be approachable and accessible.**

Encourage students at the beginning of the semester to contact you about learning accommodations.

Consider ways you might work with a student who has a *flexibility with attendance* learning accommodation that would not compromise the goals of the course, while also attempting to work with students’ circumstances. Since this learning accommodation is the one that varies most according to discipline, please see Appendix 1 for the complete the guidelines on flexible attendance from Student Disability Services.

Follow up with students throughout the semester to see how things are going and see if any adjustments would improve their learning or if their needs have changed.

Administer midterm evaluations to gauge student learning and identify any issues. Make modifications to improve learning in the second half of the semester.

**III. Be aware of stigma, and adopt practices that minimize it.**

Respect the confidentiality of students with disabilities or those needing learning accommodations. Avoid singling them out or drawing attention to their needs in class.

Treat students as partners in learning, not problems to be solved or managed.

Encourage and model mutual accountability.

Remember that disabilities come in many forms and are not always visible.

Remember that students with disabilities are not a monolithic group. Needs and preferences vary from individual to individual.

Remember that students have different learning styles, regardless of ability status. Be mindful of this, and design your course to employ a variety of teaching techniques that can appeal to a variety of ways of learning.

Move towards a “universal design” approach in which inclusivity and accommodations for all students, including those with disabilities, are built in to course design.

**IV. Make course materials accessible.**

Order books by the bookstore deadline, or earlier. This enables students to make well-informed choices, including financial choices. It also allows them to order materials in accessible formats from publishers, which can often take weeks.

Make course materials available as early as possible. This allows students to identify any materials that are not available in an accessible format.

Make the syllabus available as early as possible. This enables students to anticipate any potential accommodations they might need before the course begins.

Put all books on reserve in the library. Consider putting hard copies of all materials on reserve, or at least available upon request.

**V. Design course activities with accessibility and inclusivity in mind.**

Make students aware in advance of any learning experiences taking place outside the regular classroom. Make sure that these spaces (including transportation to them) will be accessible to all students.

Make your communication with students direct. Do not rely too heavily on nuance or an assumption that students will “read between the lines.” This is particularly important when working with students on the spectrum or with anxiety issues. Examples of direct language:

Direct: This assignment will be three pages in length and you will want to include the following information vs. Please write 3-page reflection paper.

Direct: Leah, I need you to stop insert specific behavior vs. Stop what you’re doing

Direct: What is difficult or easy working on this assignment vs. how is the assignment going?

Remember that group work can be a source of anxiety for many students. This anxiety can be lessened by making students aware of group assignments beforehand, and by not asking students to form groups on their own.

Avoid the presumption that “everyone knows” how the institution works. Always explain institutional processes, procedures, and norms as though at least one person is hearing them for the first time.

Schedule testing accommodations as early in the semester as possible. Make sure space is appropriate to the accommodation being requested (e.g., a quiet space is truly quiet).

**Appendix 1:**

**Guidelines for Flexibility with Attendance Accommodation**

Drake University makes every effort to provide reasonable academic accommodations for eligible students registered with the Student Disability Services office. Neither the College nor an individual faculty member is required to waive an essential or fundamental academic requirement of a course, regardless of the nature of the student’s disability.

Recognizing that faculty may have a policy regarding the number of absences that is permitted, and that some students experience disability-related symptoms or require treatment that can impact attendance of their classes, the Student Disability Services office has established the following guidelines to assist the faculty member/student in working through this approved accommodation.

• The student must request consideration of flexibility with attendance each new semester from Student Disability Services and be approved;

• The **flexibility with attendance** accommodation does not give the student the right to skip classes;

• The faculty member will receive an email from Student Disability Services, and the **Flexibility with Attendance form** will be provided to the faculty member by the student;

• The student is responsible for contacting the faculty member as soon as possible when a disability-related absence will occur/has occurred and when necessary inform the instructor when he/she will return to class;

• Extension of deadlines or arrangements for making up projects, exams missed, during disability-related absences must be negotiated individually with the instructor;

• The student is still responsible for all materials covered or work completed during disability-related absences;

• If at any time the faculty member believes the student’s absences from class jeopardizes the academic integrity of the curriculum, the instructor should notify both the student and Student Disability Services to review available options.

Please consider the following when determining if attendance is an essential requirement for a course.

• Is there classroom interaction between the instructor and students? Among students?

• Do student contributions make up a significant part of the learning process?

• Does the fundamental nature of the course rely on student participation as an essential method for learning?

• To what degree does a student’s failure to attend constitute a significant loss to the educational experience of other students in the class?

• What are the classroom practices and policies regarding attendance?

For questions, please contact Student Disability Services at 515-271-1835 or 515-271-2917

 **Attendance Policy: Missing Class as a Reasonable Accommodation for a Disability**

Drake University’s policy on student disability accommodation requests, in compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, and with the Americans with Disability Act of 1990 (ADA), recognized that qualified students who have diagnosed or identified disabilities are entitled to benefit from the educational programs of the University if reasonable accommodations can be arranged. Reasonable accommodations are to be made in all cases, except when they alter an essential or fundamental aspect of the course or program.

The Office of Civil Rights has found (Cabrillo Community College, Case No 09-96-2150, OCR Region IX, 1996) that attendance can be an essential aspect of a course or program and it accords significant deference to a college’s determination that attendance in a particular course is essential. We have drawn heavily on OCS’s guidelines to assess if attendance is an essential aspect of a course or program.

1. Attendance is an essential component of post-secondary education. As such, students are expected to comply with class attendance policies. However, the University recognizes that there may be times when a student cannot attend class for disability-related reasons.

2. Student Disability Services may request “flexibility in attendance policies” from an instructor. The instructor should then contact SDS to discuss if attendance is an essential element of the course.

**3. “Flexibility in attendance policies” does not mean a relaxation of course requirements. Students are required to fulfill all other course requirements and evaluation standards as specified in the course syllabus.**

4. The following questions should be considered when determining the reasonableness of this accommodation:

a) Does the fundamental nature of the course rely upon student participation as an essential method for learning?

b) To what degree does a student’s failure to attend class constitute a significant loss to the educational experience of other students in the class?

c) To what degree do the specific requirements of class activities and exercises rely upon regular attendance?

d) Do student contributions in class constitute a significant component of the learning process?

e) What does the course description and syllabus say regarding attendance? Each instructor may have different requirements regarding attendance.

f) What is the method by which the final course grade is calculated?

5. When assessing whether a request for accommodation in attendance alters an essential aspect of a course or program the following procedures can be helpful.

a) Is the absence a direct result of the student’s disability?

b) Does the faculty member consider attendance an essential aspect of the course?

c) Does the course reasonably meet one or more of the above criteria?

d) Is the attendance policy equally applied?

6. Students who are approved for the accommodation are expected to contact instructors in advance of an anticipated absence. For emergencies or unexpected absences, contact should be made as soon as possible to discuss the possibility of any make-up work and/or to verify the reason for the absence.

7. Instructors are encouraged to contact Student Disability Services if it is believed that disability-related absences have become excessive.

8. Students are made aware that absences will hurt them academically, even if the attendance policy has been relaxed, and as such, must make every attempt to attend class. Special effort by the student must be made to attend class for quizzes, exams, and deadlines for submission or assignments.

9. Students will be required to submit an accommodation form from Student Disability Services to each instructor confirming that this accommodation has been verified as reasonable. The students will sign the form stating they understand the policies and procedures developed for this accommodations. This form also states that the student agrees to abide by these policies and procedures.

10. Accommodations are not retroactive. All accommodations, including flexibility in attendance policies become effective when the student delivers the above-referenced form to the instructors in question.

11. As with all accommodations, flexibility in attendance policies is recommended on a individual, case-by-case basis depending upon (a) the submission, to SDS, of supporting medical or psycho-educational documentation from a licensed professional and (b) the reasonableness of this accommodation in each requested class as determined by discussions between the student, course instructor, and Student Disability Services.

*Adapted from The University of Mississippi, Office of Student Disability Services, Policies and Procedures for “Relaxation of Attendance Policy” and the University or Missouri-Kansas City Office of Services for Students with disabilities.*