Ability Services Anxiety Accommodations

Anxiety and other related mental health diagnoses comprise of approximately 33% of the students being serviced through the Ability Services Office. The types of accommodations that are offered for students with anxiety are more unique and non-traditional when it comes to the types of accommodations that may be required for these students.

Flexibility

Flexibility accommodations are broken into two segments (1) Flexibility on class attendance. (2) Flexibility on the due dates of assignments. There is a lot of gray space when it comes interpreting what is meant by flexibility on the due dates of assignment and class attendance. First, students are expected to initiate communication with professors ahead of time indicating that they will not be in class due or will need additional time on an assignment due to their difficult mental health condition. It is the student’s responsibility to initiate this communication. If students are not communicating with their professors regarding their absences, they are not using the accommodation appropriately and it is not deemed reasonable. A part of the accommodation is for students to advocate and communicate effectively when they miss class or if they are going to need more time on an assignment.

Here is an example of when a student may miss class and how they may respond to the situation:

Situation: Student is having a panic attack and cannot collect their thoughts and composure to make it to class.

Student: Email’s the professor and informs them of the following, “I am reaching out to as I am having significant concerns with my anxiety right now and I will be unable to make it to class today.”

Students have the discretion to share as much or is little about each situation as they see fit. It is encouraged that students feel comfortable about their condition as more information is usually helpful for faculty to better understand the needs of the student and where they are coming from. Students also sometimes state that they are using their flexibility accommodations in the communication with their instructors.

When it comes to the flexibility due date of assignments, students are to communicate ahead of time a brief reason as to why and suggest an appropriate time to turn in the assignment. Students are only to use this accommodation on a very specific basis. Students should not get extra time for each assignment only if a specific issue creates a substantial barrier based on their current condition. Ex: “I was ruminating over a situation that had happened with my peers were I felt embarrassed and insecure, I cannot stop thinking of things that I
said wrong. As a result I could not concentrate and I was unable to complete the assignment. I will turn in the completed assignment during our next class period.”

Students are to communicate every time in regards to their missed absence and every assignment that was not turned in on time. A professor cannot assume that they are gone for the anxiety based reasons every time a student misses class.

**Presentations Offered 1:1**

The ability to complete presentations 1:1 with the professor rather than in front of the class, if such a thing does not affect the course objective. If 25% of the grade is based on presentation and communication skills, it would be determined that offering the student this accommodation would indeed alter the essential element of the assignment. If the presentation is merely based on knowing the content, than it would be determined a reasonable accommodation. All 1:1 presentation accommodations are determined on a case-by-case basis. Communication with the professor, student, and Ability Services is common to determine if the accommodation is reasonable. Another reason this accommodation may be determined unreasonable would be if other classmates are receiving credit for attending their classmate’s presentations. An accommodation cannot alter any essential element of the assignment for the student or any other students in the class.

**Testing**

Testing accommodations based on anxiety is one of the most common accommodations that are offered through our office. There are two testing accommodations that are typically offered for students with severe anxiety (1) Additional Testing Time (2) Distraction reduced location to take exams. Many students who struggle with testing due to anxiety is often times related to the way that their peers view them. Many students are very worried about how they will appear to others that they are more worried about that than actually writing down answers on their exams. Others have extreme anxiety about the time and fixate on the time rather than the appropriate problems. Additional time can allow students to appropriately process the questions and focus their thoughts on the appropriate content. Being in a distraction reduced location will alleviate that idea of being the last one done and additional pressure from peers. Testing accommodations for anxiety is quite common. A student has to have a diagnosed condition of anxiety to receive this accommodation. A student cannot obtain services merely because they have test anxiety.
**Frequent Breaks:**
Allow the student to take frequent breaks. This accommodation allows the student to break appropriately when they start recognizing their triggers. Students with positive self-awareness skills will know when they will need to leave the room to manage their emotions appropriately. Most students just want to inform their professors the reason behind why they are leaving the room more than expected.

**Preferred Seating:**
Perhaps the student’s feels that they are focused less on how they are viewed by others if they do not see them. In certain instances students feel better if the only thing they really see is the professor in front of them. For some students a front row seat may be the best way for the student obtain and process the information in class effectively. On the other hand, a student may report that they suffer from panic attacks that can occur suddenly and they express feeling more comfortable attending class if they are in the back close to a door.

**Group Work:**
Students with anxiety as anticipated struggle with group work. These students struggle to connect socially and sometimes find it challenging to really demonstrate and communicate what they know. One accommodation may be simple as having the professor create the groups for group projects rather than require students to find a group. The simple task of finding a group may be challenging as they may have extremely anxious thoughts about approaching someone and feelings of extreme sadness when they may be “thrown” into a group. The more structure in the class the better for students with anxiety.

**Advocacy Support:**
As students become more self-aware of their needs and the supports that are available, there will be more conversations regarding how mental health concerns affect students academically. Some students have not independently completed this process before, so for some students it is overly anxiety producing to have to talk about personal and difficult issues with a person they hardly know and an individual they may feel intimidated by. Students may not want to approach professors to discuss these situations and may ask the Ability Services Office to step in and help explain the struggles they face. Our office helps to develop those self-advocacy skills with students to help prepare them for those difficult conversations but Ability Services staff is available as a second layer of support if they needed. This can help to reduce the feelings of judgment the student may perceive.
**NOTE**: All accommodations are determined with this basic mindset, “Does the nature of the barriers of the student’s disability substantially limit one or more aspects of their life and does it alter an essential element or objective of the assignment or course?”

**Ways to Reduce Anxiety in the Classroom.**

1) Do not assign on the spot assignments, quizzes, or ask these individuals unexpected questions on the spot. It is very difficult for students with anxiety to appropriately process when being put on the spot and to process a change in their environment. If the student knows the structure and has a good understanding of what to expect their anxiety will be reduced.

2) Students with severe anxiety get stuck in patterns of avoidance behavior. Students are more comfortable approaching difficult situations if there is an “invitation.” If they know they are welcome, they feel more comfortable coordinating and communicating with professors. If a student has disclosed to you information about their anxiety and they are associated with our office invite them to come in talk about how you can both work together to honor their needs.

3) Allowing the student to access course materials ahead of time. Setting the expectation and establishing a routine.

4) At the start of the semester, welcome all students to come and visit your office hours. Offer that invitation to the entire the class. This normalizes the process and encourages the student to engage in a task that all their peers have an opportunity to participate in.