How Do I Accommodate Student Veterans with Disabilities?

Presented by:
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Ernetta Fox: Hi. Welcome to How Do I Accommodate Student Veterans with Disabilities? I’m Ernetta Fox, director of Disability Services at the University of South Dakota. I’ve been in the position eight years now and have worked very closely with our student veterans returning to school for the past three or four years.

I want to really talk to you today about the uniqueness of the disabilities our student veterans are returning with. The conflict that they are involved in in Afghanistan and Iraq are very unique, unlike other wars or conflicts the United States has been involved in. They are on duty 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, sometimes for up to a year or longer with no breaks because of the type of warfare that they’re now seeing.

They’re seeing suicide bombers, they’re seeing IEDs or improvised explosive devices, and so they’re on constant alert while they’re in active duty, unlike previous conflicts where they may have had intense periods of fighting but then would have periods of rest afterwards. That’s not happening in today’s military. So that aspect is unique.

The other unique aspect is that we have many more veterans returning who have survived because of improvements in armament in their vehicles as well as body armor, the Kevlar vest and the improved helmets that they’re wearing. So this type of warfare with the improved survival rates, we have student veterans coming back who have some signature disabilities of these conflicts. And those are traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and pain.

In the handout that goes along with this mentor, I have much more information about those, because I don’t want to go on to those specifically today. I want to talk more about the impact of these types of disabilities on a student veteran in a classroom, and that’s the impact on their cognitive ability and in their learning. So first I want to talk a minute about the brain and what it does.

In a learning situation, the brain inputs information, integrates that information, stores that information, and outputs that information. So in a classroom, the input is the lecture, the integration are the readings, the assignments outside of class or other assignments outside of class. The lecture and those outside assignments are integrated. They’re stored, and then they’re output. Sometimes the output only happens twice a semester if you’re a professor who gives an exam at midterm and one at finals.

So that’s the process. And what happens with student veterans when they return to class, sometimes their cognitive abilities are impaired because of
their disability. So it won’t say that they have a disability specifically in the area of learning, but their disability impacts their ability to learn.

So the other thing is the brain and its task. A brain has the ability, everybody’s brain has the ability to do multiple tasks at the same time. For example, you can talk on the phone and tell your children to be quiet while you’re stirring the spaghetti. So you’re doing three things at one time. So often in the classroom, a student is doing multiple things. They’re listening to the lecture. They’re taking notes. They may even be texting under the desk to someone.

But a lot of times with a disability, those associative tasks have to become cognitive. So, for example, a person who can take notes and listen to the lecture at the same time prior to a disability may not only be able to listen to the lecture. That may become a cognitive activity. To give you a better example of the difference between associative and cognitive, you often drive while drinking coffee in your car.

But if you spill that coffee in your lap, and it’s hot, drinking the coffee becomes a cognitive task, and the associative task of driving the car is forgotten about. So that’s why you see on the news things about fender benders where people have spilled coffee, because then the coffee has become the cognitive action. And this happens for students too with disabilities.

So for student veterans with acquired disabilities related to their military service, what used to be for them associative tasks such as taking notes, listening to the lecture, maybe texting under their desk, one or more of those may have now become cognitive. They may only be able to listen to the lecture and process that information. They may not be able to take notes at the same time.

Or they may not be able to process the information in a timely manner for exams. They may need extra time for exams. So now then those student veterans who have PTSD or traumatic brain injury in the classroom appear as a student with a learning disability. So I want to go through some examples with you now of learning disabilities to give you a better understanding of what that looks like in your classroom.

So a learning disability is anything that affects the brain’s process of information or the ability to learn anywhere along one of those four areas, whether it’s in the input process, the integration process, the storage process, or the output process. And this can happen in any area, reading, math, writing. It can also sometimes affect executive functioning, which would be organizational skills and memory. These are the areas that are most affected.
So first, I want to talk to you about dyslexia, which is the inability to apply letter/sound relationships to letters and patterns to interpret them and to pronounce the written word. So that is what dyslexia is. But this is what dyslexia looks like. Often, individuals with dyslexia have difficulty with P, Q, B, and D, because to them, they’re only letters with sticks and balls attached. So when they’re reading, they have great difficulty telling the difference between these four letters. This is a type of dyslexia.

So, for example, if you work with a student with dyslexia, you often see them go like this to tell if it’s a letter D or this way to tell if it’s a letter B. And so you’ll often see them as they’re reading put up their fingers so they’ll know whether it’s a B or a D. That’s the way they’ve been trained to interpret those letters. So I want you to take a few seconds here, pause the video, and read the sentence that is below.

You can see that these letters seem to be flying off the page. And often when a student with dyslexia reads, that’s the way it appears. The letters appear to be moving. So you may have a student who uses a ruler to kind of keep the words grounded as they read. So this sentence says, my friends are coming to play football. So a very simple sentence that probably took you longer to read.

So for students with dyslexia in the classroom, you may need to give extra time if you have in-class writing assignments or reading assignments. You may need to make sure that they have those tools they need, such as a ruler. They may need to have the ability to take readings home with them in advance. That’s another accommodation you can provide. Especially if you use an online curriculum tool like D2L or WebCT, you can let them have access to the material ahead of others in the classroom.

Dsynomia is the inability to retrieve the correct word from memory when needed. This happens to all of us. I’m often calling on a word in the office. For example, I have a new secretary, and one of the first things, I walked out into her office and said, I need a, a, a, a, and she said, stapler? I said, yes, that’s what I need. So that’s what dysnomia is, and it happens to all of us. But it can affect writing or speech. So it’s more common in speech, but it does happen a lot with people who write.

So I want you to pause the video at this point. I want you to write a brief paragraph about what happened to you on the way to work this morning without using the letters T or S. Okay. So the first thing probably is you wanted to start the paragraph with, this morning on my way to work, but you couldn’t use the letter, the word this, because you couldn’t use the word T or S. That’s what it feels like to have dysnomia and have to write.
You really have to concentrate, because you’re pulling words from memory that are difficult for you to pull from memory.

So for students in the classroom with dysnomia, if it’s in the area of speech, you need to provide them extra time to answer questions or to work in groups. I know we all hate the dead time in the classroom when you ask a question and no one responds. But if you have a student with dysnomia in the classroom, it may take them another second or two or three to raise their hand to answer that question, because they’ve had difficulty pulling that information from storage that they need to answer the question. So provide more time there.

For a student who has difficulty writing, give them more time for class assignments. Especially if you assign something in class, let them know ahead of time that they’re going to be writing on this topic in class so they can be prepared. For exams that have long essays, they need extra time. That’s one of the reasons you’ll see accommodation memos from your disability services office that says extra time for exams. It’s to give a student with dysnomia the time they need to write.

Visual Processing Disorder. This is a disorder where you have difficulty interpreting what you see, especially images. For me, it really happens during night when I’m driving. And I’ll be driving, and I’ll look down the road, and I’ll think I see a person by the side of the road. And it’s actually a mailbox, or it’s a tree, or it’s a bush, because I have difficulty processing what I’m seeing.

When it comes in the newspaper in the comic section, those secret vision things, I cannot see them. A lot of people can. And so even with talking through, sometimes I can see them, so that’s what you have to do in a classroom. You have to talk a person with a visual processing disorder through what they’re looking at or give them the information in an alternate format such as in a text format.

So for this next slide, I want you to pause it, and I want you to take a few minutes or a few seconds to look at it. Tell me what that is. Okay. For some of you, you may know what it is, because this is a very famous image that’s used in a lot of psychology classes. For others, you may not. So I’m going to show you what it is. It’s a cow standing by a fence. It’s easy to see now that I have shown you what you’re looking at. So if we go back now, you can only see the cow, and you don’t understand how you didn’t see it before. That’s a visual processing disorder.

So in a classroom, you often need to give a student a text, a description of the image they’re looking at so that they have the better comprehension of what they’re seeing. This is really true in classes such as earth science,
biology, astronomy, those classes that have a lot of visual content to them. Provide an alternate text of the image. So if I could put this image up first, and I had told you that it’s a cow standing by a fence, you may have been able to see it quicker than you did by me not telling you.

So often accommodations in this way, for example, it may be an accommodation from your disability services office that says, provide copies of PowerPoints to students prior to class if possible so that the student has a chance to look at the images that you have in that PowerPoint presentation. And in PowerPoint, you have the option to do alternate text. Providing them with that alternate text, lets them have the ability to process this information before they come to the classroom so they can be more fully, more fully participate in the classroom.

Auditory processing disorder is like visual processing disorder in that a student has difficulty processing what they’re hearing. And so often if I’m not concentrating on what a person is saying to me, I’ll say what, what did you say, and I will think they said something totally different than what they were saying. This is auditory processing disorder. A good example is if you are riding in the car, and you’re singing along to the radio, and you think for sure that you know all of the words to the lyrics. But then when you look them up online, you really don’t.

My favorite is the Canadian national anthem. O Canada, we stand on cars and freeze is really, O Canada, we stand on guard for thee. So this is auditory processing disorder. For students in your classroom, especially the student veterans, it helps if they can have a written format of things that are very important that you say during a lecture so that they can see it as well as hear it.

If you’re doing a lot of online through D2L or Blackboard, an online curriculum tool, for things that you have on there that are auditory, provide a transcript. If you have a discussion, provide a transcript afterwards for students so that they can read it as well as listen to it. This is also true, another thing that a lot of our student veterans are coming back with is hearing loss due to the number of bombs and concussions that they have had while in service.

So, again, providing that in a written format is very important to them. They may hear Mary had a little lamb as Mary hatter laddle limb. And then they have to stop and process that. And it may be further down into the sentence or a paragraph during a lecture before they realize what you actually said earlier. And so listening becomes cognitive. They can’t take notes, because they are using all of their energies to listen to what you’re saying in class.
So for these students, we often do alternate text for lectures. We may sometimes actually provide them with a note taker in the classroom so that they can really listen to what’s being said instead of having to try to take notes at the same time or copy what you’ve put on the board. So a note taker is a very common accommodation for students with auditory processing disorder.

So in the classroom, if you can provide those lecture notes ahead of time for the student with the disability, the student veteran who has difficulty processing auditory information, that’s very good.

All right. Reading comprehension is another problem, and that is the inability to process words and comprehend what they say when they’re grouped together in a paragraph. I want you to take a few minutes, and I’m going to show you the next slide. And I want you to read the words, and I’m sure that you will know all of the words. Now then put all of these words into this paragraph, and pause the video and read this paragraph.

Okay. This is very difficult to understand, but we know all the words that are in it. That’s reading comprehension difficulty. And it may be that you don’t know the words, but because of the placement in a paragraph, you can understand what’s going on. So if you read this paragraph, you may not know a lot of the words, but you do know who Jepple and Hopple are and where they are going.

Dysgraphia is the inability to process information from the brain to the hand in order to write or draw, and that you can practice by using your non-dominant hand to draw this. Take a few seconds, pause the video, and you will see how difficult it is for some students with dysgraphia to take notes. For these students, providing an auditory component to your online may be good.

So there are other disabilities, one that deals with math, long-term, short-term memory. But really, what we want to talk about is how to accommodate those students? And as I’ve given you tips throughout, it’s really important to work with your office with disability services to get the accommodations. But it’s also important that you begin to design your courses so that you embrace universal design by just making sure that everyone has full and equal access to the information in your course.

And as I said before, for example, it may be that you need to give instructions in an audio as well as a written format, because the audio will help the student with dyslexia or the student who has a problem reading. The written will help that student who has difficulty processing the audio. And so providing everything in two formats is very important, and it’s very easy to do in an online format.
Provide extra time for students to speak in class, which I know is very difficult, but don’t be afraid of the dead time that you may have. Ensure full access by providing alternate text to descriptions and images so that they can see what they’re looking at by understanding the text first. And that will help them process those visual things that you give out in a classroom.

And for dysgraphia, if they don’t have access to a spell checker or a style guide, make sure that you give them some leniency on spelling and grammar and so that you really grade on the content of what they are returning to you and not on the style or the grammar or the spelling, unless that’s very important to the class. For example, if it’s a grammar class, they need to do the grammar correctly.

So I want to thank you today for joining us. I hope you’ve gained some good information to utilize in your classrooms. I really want you to take a look at the handout that’s provided with this, because there’s lots of good information there that I didn’t have time to cover in the 20 minutes that we’ve had together. But I want to thank you today for listening. And I’m hoping that when a student veteran comes to your classroom, you have a better idea of what they have in the way of a cognitive or a learning difficulty related directly to their disability that is service related.

There is a survey here we would like for you to fill out. I would like to know how I did in this 20 minutes. And I know that Magna would like to know how the production quality was for them. So please fill this out, because I do take surveys that are related to presentations I do very seriously and try to improve my presentations along the way. Thank you, again. I hope you find that the information was helpful.