

Equity Outreach Project

*Choosing to Dream,
Expanding Horizons,
Reaching Goals!*

Tools for Transition

**MODULE II:
SELF-ADVOCACY**



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It is the vision of the Montana Center on Disabilities to create a fully inclusive society which values people with disabilities and their perspectives. The Center’s mission is to support the vision of inclusion. The Montana Center on Disabilities, a public service unit of Montana State University Billings, collaborates with campus, regional, state, and national programs in support of increasing the number of leaders with disabilities.



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Self-Advocacy

This curriculum module is designed to facilitate a discussion of self-advocacy, as well as activities to build skills in this area.

Self-advocacy means standing up for oneself, actively participating in decisions about one's life, and responding appropriately to others' actions. Self-advocacy includes choices about health, education, social life, employment, living conditions, and general well-being. Most importantly, self-advocacy means communicating needs, wants, and goals to family, friends, teacher, and others.

Self-advocacy is important because every individual has the right to define her/his own needs and desires. If a student is relying on someone else to speak up for her/him, their needs and wants often go unmet. Self-advocacy is a lifelong skill that will be used while pursuing education, housing, and employment. As with any skill, practice and experience increase the individual's expertise. Self-advocacy skills are an excellent foundation for future success!

Individuals with disabilities also need to be able to talk about their own personal definition of their disability. While two people might share the same diagnosis, each person's experiences and needs are different. When students are able to self-identify, that is, acknowledge and describe their disability, they are on their way to self-advocacy.

Therefore, the first step in self-advocacy for a person with a disability is to understand the disability not only from a clinical and/or academic point of view, but from personal perspective – “How has this affected my life?”

The self-advocacy module was developed with the understanding that each student will enter a mentoring program with a different set of skills. Some students may be very familiar and comfortable with their disability, both as a clinical diagnosis and as a part of their lives. Others may not be aware of their disability other than that they are in “special classes” or “receive services.” The next page is a worksheet that will help in this process.

As in previous modules, assist the student in whatever ways are needed to complete the work sheets. This may involve reading aloud to the student,

copying down her/his responses, assisting with the writing process, or other adaptations.

Defining My Disability Exercise

1. What is your disability (why do you qualify for special education)? If you do not know ask your teacher for a copy of your Individual Education Program (IEP)/504 and identify your disability.
2. Research your disability by visiting three websites about your diagnosis. List information that you did not already know about your disability, including any famous people who have the same disability.
3. What are the academic accommodations that you receive? If you do not know, ask the teacher for a copy of your IEP/504 and find the accommodations. Discuss how the accommodations help you in the classroom.
4. How is your personal experience with this disability different from what you have seen on the Internet or in books?
5. Write a definition of your disability that is specific to you and your life.

Disclosure

For an individual with a disability, self-advocacy often involves disclosing that they have a disability. One of the most personal decisions for a young person with a disability is deciding to tell someone about the disability. Disclosure has an element of risk and therefore is often done with great anxiety. In order for your student to have the strength and courage to do this, s/he must know and understand her/his disability and be comfortable talking about it.

An individual with a disability is not legally obligated to disclose to anyone that s/he has a disability, but disclosing a disability can open doors. Post-secondary schools and/or employers are not obligated to ask if an individual needs accommodations. Therefore, if an individual who needs accommodations does not request them, it is unlikely that any accommodations will be offered.

Most employers and post-secondary schools will NOT offer accommodations when an individual discloses having a disability. That is not their responsibility and, after all, not all disabilities are the same nor do they affect everyone the same way. After high school, the individual with a disability will need to identify, within the guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the accommodations that are needed in order to work and/or learn. To request an accommodation, it is best to disclose the disability, explain how it affects the student individually, and present a plan or proposal for accommodation.

Access and Accommodation

The Individual with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA) is a federal law that mandates public schools within each state to provide a “free, appropriate public education” to children with disabilities. Children who qualify under IDEA for special education are entitled to services. The key word here is “entitled,” meaning the schools are mandated by the federal government to identify and provide special education to the students. Special education means a specifically designed program that meets the child’s unique needs with a disability.

To qualify for special education a child must be assessed by a team of professionals who determine if the child meets the qualifications. The child must also be 3 – 21 years old.

Disabilities that qualify under IDEA:

- Autism
- Emotional Disability
- Hearing Impairment
- Other/ Health Impairment
- Specific Learning Disability
- Mild, Moderate or Severe Mental Retardation*
- Multiple Disabilities
- Multiple Disabilities with Severe Sensory Impairment*
- Orthopedic Impairment*
- Preschool Moderate Delay
- Preschool Severe Delay
- Speech/Language Impairment*
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Visual Impairment*
- Preschool Speech and Language Delay

(Remember that schools and medical providers may still use terms that often seem outdated, such as “retardation” and “impairment.”)

When a student is diagnosed with a disability, a child study team that includes school personnel, the student and the student’s family (as well as other professionals as necessary) meet to develop an Individual Education Program (IEP). The student’s IEP outlines academic objectives for the school year as well as the accommodations that will be provided in order to facilitate the student’s success.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a civil rights law designed to eliminate discrimination on the basis of disability in any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance, including schools. Schools are obligated to offer certain services under Section 504 when they receive federal dollars.

“No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States....shall solely by reason of disability, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” (from the text of Section 504)

Qualifications for 504:

- Has a mental or physical impairment which substantially limits one or more of such a person’s major life activities
- Has a record of such an impairment
- Is regarded as having such an impairment

While students under a 504 plan are expected to maintain the same standard of learning as other students, some accommodations under a 504 plan might include:

- Having a note-taker
- Having extended testing time
- Tape recording a lecture
- Using an elevator
- Extended pass time between classes

Students whose elementary and/or secondary education is supported by an IEP or a 504 plan are entitled to accommodations intended to ensure their SUCCESS in an academic setting.

However, in the case of post-secondary education and/or employment, the individual must request necessary accommodations – they will not be automatically offered, even when the school or employer is aware of the student’s disability. This is also federal law.

A 504 plan, in elementary and high school, is determined by the school and by the student's needs. In post-secondary settings, the student must identify their need for 504 accommodations. The post-secondary institution will offer appropriate academic adjustments, as necessary, to ensure that it does not discriminate based on disability.

In employment situations, which fall under the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), an individual with a disability may request reasonable accommodations to fulfill essential duties of the job. In both cases, academic and employment, it will be necessary to provide documentation regarding the disability. Before the student leaves school, it is helpful to prepare them with required documentation.

What does this mean for students? It means that they will need to have both documentation of their disability and knowledge of the accommodations they may need to succeed. They will also have to have skills in self-advocacy because they are responsible for their own destiny. The young person will no longer be given services automatically, but will have to take a course of action to continue on the path toward success. Empowerment, self esteem, and knowledge will be the greatest tools in building the road to adulthood.

Access and Accommodation Exercise

1. Do you have an IEP or a 504 plan in school?
2. Who decided if you should have these plans for school?
3. After graduation, when you are looking for work, college, or training options, will you have an IEP or 504 plan?
4. Who will request 504/ADA accommodations in a post-secondary institution or the workplace?
5. What is the difference between a high school IEP/504 plan and a postsecondary 504 plan?
6. Do you have to prove that you have a disability to get an academic adjustment in a post-secondary institution?

Reasonable Accommodation and Essential Job Functions

Even before students leave high school, they should understand how the concepts of “reasonable accommodation” and “essential job functions” will affect their current employment and future careers. These are concepts and rules introduced with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

What is a “reasonable accommodation”?

To be covered by the ADA, a person with a disability must disclose that disability to the employer and request an accommodation. In some cases of discrimination and wrongful employment practices, those who are known or assumed to have a disability are also covered.

When a person tells an employer (before or after they are hired) that they have a disability and need some type of assistance or change in order to do their job, the employer must make a “reasonable accommodation.” This means a change or adjustment that permits a qualified applicant or employee with a disability to apply, perform her/his job, or to enjoy the benefits and privileges of employment equal to those without a disability.

Some examples include

- A ramp to allow an elevator access
- Breaks at a certain time to allow for management of diabetes
- A sign language interpreter for meetings
- Low noise levels in the work area to avoid triggering PTSD

What are “essential job functions”?

In order for an accommodation of any type to be made, the employee must prove that s/he is able to perform the “essential functions” of the job with or without reasonable accommodation. This means that there are certain skills, duties, and tasks that are required. If appropriate, an accommodation may be made to assist the individual in completing the task, but the employer has a right to expect that the employee can perform the duty.

For instance, excellent eyesight is an “essential function” of being a pilot. There is no way to accommodate an individual who is blind or low vision in piloting a plane safely. Another example might be math skills for a server at

a restaurant, reading skills for a copy editor, or an ability to deal with upset or angry people for a customer service representative.

As students plan for the future, it is wise to keep in mind the essential functions of the jobs that interest them. If possible, look for ways to strengthen skills where needed, rather than steering a student away from a career field that might be appropriate. However, especially for students with learning disabilities or mental health issues, expert guidance may be needed to ensure that they learn ways to match their abilities and talents with the types of careers in which they will shine and succeed.

Accessing Accommodations and Services in College

Accessing services in a post-secondary academic environment varies from institution to institution. However, every institution has policy and procedures for accessing services.

For example, a copy of MSU Billings' Disability Support Services Student Accommodations Policy and Procedure is included on the next two pages. With your student, please read through the Policy and Procedure and the Who is Eligible information and then complete the Post-secondary Education Worksheet.

Sample: MSU-Billings Disability Support Services Student Accommodations Policy and Procedure

Montana State University Billings (MSU Billings) has a policy of providing reasonable accommodations to qualified students with a disability according to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act to assure that there will be no discrimination on the basis of disability. Accommodations (sometimes called academic adjustments) are adjustments made for students with disabilities in order to allow them to access the same education experiences as their peers. The purpose of an accommodation is to "level the playing field."

Students with disabilities who require accommodations must register with Disability Support Services (DSS). It is the student's responsibility to initiate the request for services. Students are encouraged to request accommodations at least four weeks before the beginning of classes.

Students with a disability must bring documentation from the appropriate medical or psychological personnel and make an appointment for an intake with the coordinator of Disability Support Services.

Policies for required documentation vary according to the disability. The documentation must clearly identify the disability and provide sufficient information regarding the limitations of the disability in order to permit Montana State University Billings to make a determination as to whether the requested adjustments are appropriate. While MSU Billings must consider the documentation provided by the student, it is not required to adopt the recommendations of the evaluator regarding the appropriate academic adjustments. It is MSU Billings' right to determine, based upon the evaluative data, what those adjustments should be (Disability Accommodation Digest, Volume 1, No. 3). Please ask what the documentation requirements are for your disability.

Releases of information to obtain documentation are available from Disability Support Services. However, it is usually in the students' best interest to keep their own file of documentation and allow service providers (such as DSS) to make copies. Students are responsible for any charges incurred obtaining documentation.

Accommodations will be determined based upon the documentation of the disability. It is important to have the documentation state how the disability affects academic performance in "hidden" disabilities. Students who believe that they would like additional adjustments must make the request in writing to the coordinator of Disability Support Services. These will be considered on a case-by-case basis, and decisions may involve various personnel (for instance, Vocational Rehabilitation counselors, medical professionals, faculty, the student, and the coordinator of Disability Support Services).

After accommodations have been established, students with disabilities will then be issued an identification card or letter verifying that they are registered with Disability Support Services and listing the accommodations for which they qualify.

It is in the best interest of students requiring classroom accommodations to notify the instructors before the semester begins so that if there are any problems there is time to negotiate a resolution. Students may request help from DSS to facilitate this process.

Students who are experiencing unresolved problems receiving appropriate accommodations should contact the coordinator of Disability Support Services.

Reference:

<http://www.msubillings.edu/dss/Policies%20and%20Procedures.html>

Academic Accommodations Examples

To give students an understanding of how this works in the “real world,” here are examples of some common academic accommodations. (Adapted from the Winona State University Disability Services Handbook, Winona, MN). www.winona.edu/disabilityservices/handbooks/student/examples.html

Testing Accommodations: If testing accommodations are supported in your documentation (meaning they are appropriate to your disability and/or have been provided in the past), you may be eligible for extended test time, low distraction test area, taped-recorded tests, or scribing (where you speak and someone else writes down your words).

Interpreter Services: If you are Deaf or Hard of Hearing and need interpreter services, the Disability Services office will generally assist you in arranging sign language interpretation as appropriate.

Tape Recorded Lectures: If tape-recorded lectures are part of your accommodations, you will receive authorization from Disability Services. The student is generally responsible for providing the professor with documentation that tape-recording is needed.

Writing/Scribing: If your disability affects your ability to write, you may request assistance from a scribe through Disability Services. This assistance would include in-class assignments, but not homework assignments. Word processors are widely available throughout most campuses and can be a great help to students who can type, but not write.

Lab Assistance: If you have a physical disability that limits your handling of lab materials, contact Disability Services as soon as you pre-register (prior to the start of the semester). The Disability Services office and the professor will work together to work out an accommodation (in some cases, such as medical school, not all accommodations can be made. For instance, a student who is blind or has low vision will generally not be accepted into a medical program because the ability to observe is considered essential for the career of physician).

Taped Textbooks: Students who are eligible for taped textbooks need to meet with Disability Services to arrange this.

Faculty Notification: When Disability Services receives your completed paperwork, notification will be prepared for the faculty. It is usually the student's responsibility to deliver this notification. Ideally, inform the professor before classes start – or early in the semester -- so that you may benefit the entire term. Many students have found that contacting professors prior to the start of the semester encourages effective communication.

Sample: Who is Eligible? (also from MSU Billings)

Students with documented disabilities whose disability functionally limits them in an academic environment may request services.

Students with a disability have the responsibility to identify themselves and request reasonable and appropriate accommodations and/or modifications.

If you would like to request services:

- Contact Disability Support Services as soon as you are admitted to Montana State University-Billings
- Make an appointment for an intake interview
- Bring documentation of your disability

Documentation must include:

- A statement of disability on the letterhead of a qualified professional
- A statement of how the disability limits you in an academic environment
- A statement recommending accommodations based upon the functional limitations (see Accommodations Policies)

All students are encouraged to contact Disability Support Services in the early stages of their academic planning. Please call (406) 657-2283 (Voice/TTY) for more information.

In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, Montana State University Billings also ensures academic program accessibility as well as building accessibility for all persons with disabilities. No individual with a disability shall, by reason of such disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the campus services, programs, or activities, or be subject to discrimination by any such covered entity.

<http://www.msubillings.edu/dss/Policies%20and%20Procedures.html>

Post-secondary Education Exercise

With your mentor’s help, research two or three (or more) post-secondary options for education that relate to your interests and find out what kind of documentation they need to make accommodations for your disability. A post-secondary option may be a trade school, apprenticeship program, technical college, “four-year” college, or a university. Look at both in-state and out of state institutions. Note the name of their disability support service, what services they provide, what you liked and what you disliked, as well as the documents and paperwork you will need.

Name of Institution	Name of the Disability Support Services office	Services Provided	What did you like? What did you dislike?	Type of Documentation Required

Post-secondary Education Exercise (cont.)

1. Are there differences among universities?
2. What are those differences?
3. Is there one post-secondary option that you liked best? Why?
4. What do you think about going to college or technical school now?

Employment Disclosure

Job seeking can be adventurous and challenging. When setting up a job shadow or part-time employment, the student will be faced with whether or not to disclose a disability.

The decision to disclose a disability is up to the student. Only s/he will know if and when disclosure is appropriate. Whether in a group or one-on-one, the following process can help a student make that decision.

1. For each position (job shadow, internship, or regular employment), the student will need a copy of the job description so s/he can review the essential functions of the job before s/he decides to apply. Remember that accommodations are not required if the student cannot meet the essential functions. Initially, the student may need help getting the job description, whether directly from the employer or online.
2. From the job description, identify potential accommodations that might be needed. Prioritize those that would be needed immediately, but also keep a list of *possible* accommodations that might be required.
3. When the student completes the application, s/he will often be asked what accommodations are needed. Remember, the student will have to disclose her/his disability if s/he wants to receive job-related accommodations. Work with the student to determine if s/he needs to disclose and ask for accommodation right away or after starting the job.
4. The following link is a workbook from the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability NCWD/ Youth, [The 411 on Disability Disclosure: A Workbook for Youth with Disabilities](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/resources_publications/411.html). This workbook is downloadable and will assist the student in learning the how and why of disclosing their disability. Please take the time to use this workbook with your student.

[http://www.ncwd-youth.info/resources & Publications/411.html](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/resources_publications/411.html)

The Five “W’s” and an “H” of Disability Disclosure: Exercise

1. Who: To whom would you disclose or not disclose your disability?
2. What: What about the disability would you choose to disclose?
3. Where: In what settings is it important or not important to disclose your disability?
4. When: At what point in a relationship (personal, educational, or employment) would you disclose your disability?
5. Why: Why will you benefit by disclosing your disability? What is the disadvantage of disclosing your disability?
6. How: How would you disclose your disability?

Reasonable Accommodations

Search the internet or newspaper for three jobs you might enjoy.

1. Define what a reasonable accommodation might be for that job, if any.
2. What are the “essential functions” of the job? You may have to look at larger companies’ websites to get complete job descriptions.
3. When would you consider disclosing your disability to your employer and ask for reasonable accommodations?
4. Do you expect you will need reasonable accommodations? What might they be like?

Essential Functions of the Job Exercise continued

Have or help the student complete the worksheet with information learned from the websites that you visited.

Job Title:

Employer Name:

Essential Functions of the Job:

Necessary Accommodations:

Comments:

Accommodation Strategies Exercise

1. In a previous exercise, Defining My Disability, students defined their disabilities. Write, in your own words, how you would explain your disability.
2. In a previous exercise, The Five “W’s” and an “H” of Disability Disclosure, you identified people to whom you would disclose your disability. The How to Disclose and Ask for Accommodations worksheet (next page) will guide you through the process.
3. Practice asking for an accommodation on a teacher, mentor, friend, or family member.
4. Once you feel comfortable, practice asking for an accommodation with someone you don’t know well, preferably an employer or a career development professional (like a Disability Services staff person or an employment agency worker).

Practice is the key to being successful. It can be difficult and a little scary in the beginning, but as you practice you will find it easier and easier to ask for needed accommodations.

How to Disclose and Ask for Accommodations Exercise

Use this worksheet to plan your “ask.”

1. Introduce yourself and give some information about yourself: What grade are you in? Are you interested in a job, internship, or job shadow? Are you interested in going to school?
2. What strengths do you bring to this job or college experience? List your skills and experience, such as classes where you received good grades, activities you did well in, or previous jobs where you were a good employee.
3. Explain your disability – as it affects you, in your own words.
4. What accommodations will you need for this experience? If you have used successful accommodations in the past, explain them.
5. Repeat two or three of your strengths.
6. State that you are very interested in employment/education.
7. Thank the person and ask if they have any questions or need any additional information. If you have references, mention them at this time.

Module II

References

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 U.S.C. 12101 et seq.

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