

FAQs: Decision-Making Process & the Role of Documentation

What is the purpose of the accommodation review process?

The purpose of the accommodation review process is to ensure a student is not discriminated against solely on the basis of disability and has the same level of access to UMass as their nondisabled peers. The goal is equal access and equal opportunity, not to facilitate a specific accommodation.

(Accommodations in the K – 12 environment may reduce standards and expectations to promote academic success because success is central to the K – 12 accommodation process. The fundamental baseline in college is equal access and opportunity relative to other students.)

How are reasonable accommodation decisions made?

Disability Services facilitates an interactive process to understand a student's academic experiences and how any accommodations requested are necessary to ensure nondiscrimination and equal access and opportunity. The goal is to remove adjustable academic barriers created by the college environment. Every request for an accommodations is explored on an individual, case-by-case basis in which facts and relevant information are gathered. The process may be brief or may involve a series of communication exchanges depending on the nature of the request. Disability Services strives to make initial accommodation decisions within seven days of gathering all necessary information; depending upon the time of the semester and the volume of requests, however the process may take around 2-3 weeks to complete.

We rely on a combination of the following information to make informed decisions:

- Student narrative/history, and

- Third-party documentation from a qualified medical/health/counseling provider (with extent of documentation needed to vary by the situation), and
- Consultation with other members of the campus community (as necessary)

What is the role of third-party documentation in determining reasonable accommodations?

Disability Services may need third-party documentation for two reasons:

1. To establish that a student has a disability.
2. To provide information to help us understand how and why a requested accommodation may be reasonable, logical, and necessary to ensure nondiscrimination and equality of access relative to the disability.

Documentation that includes any of the following points, though not exhaustive in scope, may be helpful in our analysis:

- Explanation of how the functional limitations of a disability impact a specific academic experience (such as why more time for exams is needed due to a disability).
- Objective/evaluative data with professional recommendations/analysis that suggests why an accommodation is necessary for a student to have equal access to the educational opportunity.
- Specific insight based on historical knowledge about how a disability limits equal access within various academic experiences (testing, reading, etc.).

When recommendations within documentation would primarily enhance academic success or are considered outside the scope of what is necessary for equal access, the student will be referred to other resources and or given options that may be able to address the specific need.

While third-party documentation may be sufficient to establish the presence of a disability, documentation alone does not inform whether accommodations are reasonable. Medical information will be considered but is not the definitive information that informs our final decisions. We consider a multitude of factors. A medical provider's recommended accommodation will be taken into consideration alongside other factors as Disability Services determines what a reasonable accommodation may be but it does not guarantee its approval.

What factors are considered when determining if an accommodation is reasonable?

Disability Services prioritizes equity and strives to facilitate accommodations that offer the most equitable experience without fundamentally altering an essential outcome or aspect of a course or campus experience. Students with disabilities meet the same academic standards and essential course objectives as every other student. Furthermore, the overall expectations of being a college student as required of all students at UMass are not to be reduced.

The interactive process at times may include consultation with faculty and others to ensure reasonable access is facilitated, which may occur through academic accommodations or other measures (such as inclusive design).

The Disability Services team utilizes a structured review process for each accommodation request. An appeal process is available for students who do not agree with the initial determination.

When necessary, reasonable accommodations are facilitated when the accommodation addresses all the following:

- Establishes meaningful access or an equal opportunity to: 1) Fully engage and participate in the same activities, campus services, benefits and experiences offered to a person without a disability; 2) Utilize the same information shared with everyone; and 3) Have the same opportunity to achieve.
- Logically addresses the impacts of one's disability relative to the barriers/challenges established by and rooted in the academic and/or campus environment. (Academic challenges in isolation of an academic barrier are not accommodated.)
- Is logically designed to and will effectively remove the identified academic/campus barrier to equitable access.
- Ensures that academic requirements or technical standards do not discriminate against a student based on disability.

When are accommodations potentially not reasonable?

Requested accommodations will not be facilitated for disability reasons or within the context of a specific academic experience if the accommodation would result in any of the following:

- Lowering an academic standard, such that it becomes inappropriately easier for a student to fulfill the mandatory elements or learning objectives required of all other students for the course, program, or degree achievement.
- Removing or waiving acquisition of an essential skill such that it becomes impossible to accurately assess the individual student's learning, knowledge, and course work relative to the required course, program, or degree goals, and/or essential elements.
- Reducing expectations of what is generally expected of all college students (including but not limited to consistent in-class participation, managing time and deadlines, content memorization, and experiencing challenges with academic content).
- A significant change in the nature of the program.
- Removing or waiving acquisition of a skill that is directly related to the health and safety of others.
- Establishing the accommodation would pose a health or safety risk to the student with a disability or others within the academic setting.
- Removing or waiving requirements that are directly related to qualifying for a professional license.
- Enhance student success without removing an academic/institutional barrier that impedes equitable access.
- Address something that the student could otherwise manage through various approaches (time management, reduced course load, different study strategies, etc.).

At times, an accommodation may be deemed reasonable for disability reasons but is not reasonable within the context of a specific academic experience after further analysis due to one or more of the above-listed factors.

For example: if a student has an approved accommodation for disability-related absences and is enrolled in a performance-based class, it may be deemed unreasonable to excuse them from more than a set amount of in-class participation. Their attendance and participation, in this case, is necessary to assess their acquisition of a skill; excusing them from it would lower academic expectations. Further analysis and collaboration between Disability Services, the student, and the instructor would be required to assess appropriate application of the accommodation in this specific course.