

Reasonable Accommodation Guide

Students with disabilities are an important part of our diverse Brandeis community, which includes students with a range of physical, sensory, psychological, medical and learning disabilities. Students who confront barriers in their learning experiences as a result of the intersection between their disability and the structure of a course, assignment, space, etc. may request a reasonable accommodation to support equitable access.

To determine whether a requested accommodation is reasonable, a faculty member may consider if it would result in a fundamental alteration to the course or program. A fundamental alteration changes the essential requirements of a course or program, including the content and objectives. Essential requirements are the core learning outcomes (including skills and knowledge) all students must demonstrate. Questions to determine essential components of a course include: What percentage of subject area knowledge must be mastered? And what specific knowledge, principles, or concepts must be mastered? Accommodations should not compromise the essential elements of a course or curriculum, nor should they weaken the academic standards or integrity of a course.

When faculty receive a letter from Student Accessibility Support, and they have concerns about an accommodation fundamentally altering a course, the following steps should be taken:

1. Contact Student Accessibility Support (SAS) at access@brandeis.edu to discuss whether an essential or fundamental component of the course is being altered. Remember that accommodation letters are broad, reflecting different student needs as well as different course structures. What may be appropriate for one kind of course may not be appropriate for another.
2. Working with SAS, ask the questions:
 - What methods of instruction are non-negotiable, and why?
 - What skills and knowledge are absolutely necessary to demonstrate core learning outcomes, and why?
 - What are acceptable levels of performance on these measures, and why?
3. Working with SAS, determine if the accommodation fundamentally alters the course. The examples on pages 2 and 3 provide guidance for how to think about what does and does not fundamentally alter the nature of a course.

In most cases, the faculty member and SAS will work together to determine a plan to reasonably accommodate a student without fundamentally altering the course. In rare cases, faculty and SAS may not come to a resolution about accommodations and the fundamental nature of the course. If this is the case, the faculty member should collaborate with SAS and the appropriate school administrator (Senior Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, School of Arts and Sciences; Senior Associate Dean, International Business School; Assistant Dean, the Heller School for Social Policy and Management; Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs, GSAS; Dean, Rabb School) to prepare one document together that provides the facts of the case, including areas of agreement and disagreement about the proposed plan of action. The representative administrator, in consultation with General Counsel and SAS, will determine how to proceed.

Brandeis prides itself on being a welcoming learning environment for all of our students. We believe that communication between faculty and SAS can provide appropriate accommodations for our students, while preserving what makes each course meaningful and providing support for faculty in teaching their courses.

Example 1—Oral Presentations:

No Fundamental Alteration of a Course: A student cannot participate in two oral presentations for a disability related reason. They make up 25% of your course grade. Her accommodation letter from SAS includes flexibility around oral presentations, and she asks if she can present to just you in your office. You feel that this will still demonstrate the same academic skill set, and not lower the measurable standard. Therefore, this accommodation must be provided.

Fundamental Alteration of a Course: You teach a graduate level course on Clinical Research Methodology, in which a substantive group presentation to the class and members of the department is the final project. A student requests to present to you privately. You and your department determine that the ability to present data in public is a fundamental requirement of all graduate students in your program. You consider alternatives with SAS such as presenting publicly via Zoom. However, it is determined that a synchronous, physical, in person presentation is demonstrating an essential skill for the class. Because the presentation is an essential skill, an accommodation would be a fundamental alteration of the course, and it would be denied.

Example 2—Extensions on Assignments:

No Fundamental Alteration of a Course: You teach a class in which four papers are required for your course, and demonstrated mastery of the material is more important than meeting a specific deadline. A student's accommodation letter allows for extra time on assignments. You feel that this will still demonstrate the same academic skill set, and not lower the measurable standard. Therefore, this accommodation must be provided.

Fundamental Alteration of a Course: You teach a STEM course with more than 100 enrolled students. Each week, you have an assignment due, and in the past, you have not accepted late assignments, and the answer key for each assignment was released within 24 hours. A student's accommodation letter allows for extra time on assignments. Working with SAS, you determine that while you could allow for an extension of 24 hours, you could not offer additional extended time for weekly assignments because it would fundamentally alter the course. SAS modifies the student's accommodation for these assignments to have extensions be limited to 24-hours. More than a 24-hour extension of the deadline is considered a fundamental alteration of the course, and could be denied.

Example 3—Flexibility Around Attendance Beyond What May be Standard for the Class:

No Fundamental Alteration of a Course: You teach a class in which attendance is not required. You want students to attend, but on any given day, 10-20% of your class is absent with no penalty and are allowed to watch class recordings and answer questions asynchronously to show engagement. A student's accommodation letter allows for flexibility around attendance beyond what may be standard and this will not fundamentally alter the nature of your course. Therefore, the accommodation must be provided.

Fundamental Alteration of a Course: You teach a science lab that involves working with reagents that need to be prepped in advance and carefully maintained. Your standard attendance policy is to allow two absences. Labs cannot be made up due to the delicate nature of the reagents, and there are only 8 lab sessions total, so missing more than two makes it impossible to accurately determine students' level of laboratory skills. In this case, additional absences may be denied.

Example 4 –Providing Summaries/Slides Before or After Class

No Fundamental Alteration of a Course: You teach a class in which you use PowerPoint slides to outline key information or points in your lecture. You post these slides on Latte after each class. A student's accommodation letter requests that you share these slides with them at least 24 hours in advance of the class.

Fundamental Alteration of a Course: You teach an advanced language class, and part of what you are assessing is a student's ability to comprehend and reply to prompts in the moment. Your slides contain the prompts you will be given to assess this in class as part of the participation grade. Providing the slides before class would negate this learning outcome for students with early access. In this case, early access can be denied, but the slides should still be provided after. Alternatively, if it is critical for a student to have their own access to slides in class (e.g., a student with a visual impairment who needs to zoom in on their own device in order to follow along), other slides could still be provided in advance with the ones displaying prompts for this comprehension exercise being deleted from the shared version.