

# **Ashton, Kofke, & Sniatecki – Student Disclosure of Disability in Higher Education – AHEAD 2025**

## **Case Study: Pressure to Disclose**

### **Background:**

Taylor is a third-year college student majoring in biology who has a documented disability involving a chronic neurological condition. With support from the university's Disability Services Office (DSO), Taylor receives academic accommodations such as extended time on exams and access to lecture recordings. These accommodations are outlined in a formal letter from the DSO, which students are expected to share with their professors each semester.

### **The Interaction:**

During the second week of the semester, Taylor approached Dr. Reynolds, their anatomy professor, after class to provide the accommodation letter. Dr. Reynolds read the letter and said, "I like to understand what my students are going through. Can you tell me more about your condition so I can better support you?" Taylor responded with a polite but hesitant, "I'd prefer to keep the details private." Dr. Reynolds persisted, saying, "It's hard for me to make exceptions unless I fully understand what you're dealing with. I need to know what your disability is."

Taylor left the conversation feeling anxious and conflicted. They later emailed Disability Services to report the interaction, expressing concern that they were being asked to disclose private medical information in order to receive support.

### **Analysis Questions:**

1. **What aspects of Dr. Reynolds' response may have contributed to Taylor's discomfort?**
2. **What are the legal and ethical boundaries regarding disability disclosure in higher education?**
3. **How could Dr. Reynolds have responded differently to support Taylor without overstepping?**
4. **What role does institutional training play in preventing interactions like this?**
5. **How might Taylor's academic experience be impacted by this interaction going forward?**
6. **What systems or support structures should be in place to protect students' rights and promote inclusive faculty practices?**

## **Case Study: Questioning Invisible Disabilities**

### **Background:**

Jordan is a sophomore majoring in political science who lives with generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder. After registering with the university's Disability Services Office (DSO), Jordan received approved accommodations including flexible deadlines, the option to take exams in a reduced-distraction testing environment, and occasional excused absences for mental health episodes.

### **The Interaction:**

Jordan emailed their professor, Dr. Alvarez, during the third week of the semester to share their accommodation letter. The letter included the flexible deadlines accommodation, and Jordan preemptively noted they would try to stay on schedule but might occasionally need an extension.

Dr. Alvarez responded, "I'm not sure how flexible deadlines work in a class like this where due dates are firm for everyone else. Deadlines are essential to maintaining fairness. If you're just feeling overwhelmed, wouldn't it be better to focus on time management or drop the course if it's too much?"

Jordan was taken aback. Although they had developed strong time-management strategies with their counselor, their mental health symptoms sometimes became unpredictable. The suggestion to drop the course felt dismissive and punitive. Jordan forwarded the email to their DSO coordinator, who scheduled a meeting with both parties to clarify expectations and reaffirm Jordan's right to reasonable accommodations.

### **Analysis Questions:**

1. **What assumptions did Dr. Alvarez make about mental health disabilities and academic performance?**
2. **How do invisible disabilities like anxiety and depression challenge traditional faculty perceptions of who "needs" accommodations?**
3. **What impact might Dr. Alvarez's response have on Jordan's sense of belonging and self-advocacy?**
4. **How should faculty balance academic integrity and fairness with legal requirements to provide accommodations?**
5. **What could Dr. Alvarez have said or done differently in response to Jordan's accommodation letter?**
6. **How can universities better prepare faculty to support students with mental health disabilities in ways that reduce stigma and promote equity?**

## **Case Study: Misinterpreting Engagement**

### **Background:**

Sam is a first-year art education student with ADHD and sensory processing challenges. To help maintain focus and manage restlessness during lectures, Sam often doodles quietly in the margins of their notebook. This coping strategy has been discussed and supported by both their therapist and the university's Disability Services Office (DSO), and is part of an approved accommodation plan to allow "non-disruptive fidgeting or self-regulatory behavior in class."

### **The Interaction:**

About a month into the semester, Dr. Langley, who teaches Foundations of Education, pulled Sam aside after class. "I've noticed you spend a lot of time drawing instead of paying attention," she said. "This is a serious course — you can't expect to succeed if you're not fully engaged."

Sam explained that doodling actually helped them focus and that it was an accommodation. Dr. Langley looked skeptical and replied, "I'm all for creativity, but I think it's more of a distraction than a support. If you're going to be in my class, I need you to be present like everyone else."

Feeling dismissed and unsure of how to respond, Sam left the conversation discouraged. Later, they contacted the DSO for support, leading to a facilitated meeting with the professor to clarify the accommodation and discuss inclusive teaching strategies.

### **Analysis Questions:**

1. **What assumptions did Dr. Langley make about attention and engagement in the classroom?**
2. **How can educators distinguish between distraction and neurodivergent self-regulation?**
3. **What is the potential impact on a student when their accommodations are minimized or invalidated?**
4. **How could Dr. Langley have approached this situation differently?**
5. **What strategies could faculty use to foster neurodiversity-affirming classrooms?**
6. **How can institutions better equip professors to understand and support alternative forms of engagement?**