

From Compliance to Culture

Raymond Anderson, MBA, MA

Access

Ensure baseline
compliance and
resources

Belonging

Foster inclusive
relationships
and support

Engagement

Enable active
participation and
culture

We ask you to join us in creating a culture that reflects...

Access and Inclusion

and

Civility and Respect

...this week and in all aspects of our organization.

Why Did You Enter This Field?

Take 30 seconds. Before we talk about framework, policy, or practice – let's start where it all begins: **you**.

- To Help Students
 - A desire to make the college experience more equitable and less isolating for students navigating barriers.
- To Advocate
 - A commitment to speaking up for students who face systemic, environmental, or attitudinal barriers.
- To Create Equity
 - A belief that every student deserves a genuine opportunity to access and succeed in higher education.
- You Found Your Way Here:
 - Some of us arrived through an unexpected path – and discovered a calling we didn't know we were looking for

Turn to a partner. Share your answer. **Most of us did not enter this profession because we loved documentation and accommodation letters.**

What We Inherit vs. What Students Need

There is often a gap between the system we are handed, and the experiences students are seeking. Understanding the gap is the first step towards bridging it.

What Many Professionals Inherit

- Documentation requirements
- Policies and procedures
- Compliance expectation
- Accommodation workflows
- Risk management concerns

What Students Experience

- Connection and trust
- A sense of belonging
- Genuine support
- Partnership in problem-solving
- Being seen as a whole person

Students rarely experience accessibility through policy. **Students experience accessibility through people.**

The Heart of This Work

1: Compliance creates **Access**

3: Belonging creates **Engagement**

2: Culture creates **Belonging**

People stay where they feel they belong – In families, faith communities, friend groups, sports teams, and college campuses. **Accessibility is not simply about helping students access college. It is about helping students experience belonging within college.**

Compliance is the Floor

Compliance and culture are not opposites – they are partners in a hierarchy. One sets the minimum, the other defines the aspiration.

Compliance asks...

- What is *allowed*?
- Documentation
- Transaction
- Accommodation
- Consistency

Culture asks...

What is *possible*?

Dialogue

Relationship

Belonging

Connection

Compliance is not the enemy. Compliance is the floor. Culture is the ceiling. Great accessibility offices build from the floor up – and never stop there.

The Accessibility Decision Framework

Every complex accessibility decision lives at the intersection of three essential questions. This framework is the organizing framework of our practice.

What is Right?

(professional judgement that balances access, equity, integrity, and human dignity)

What is Needed?

(Student-centered understanding of barriers, functional impact, and desired outcomes)

What is required?

(legal and institutional obligations – ADA, Section 504, institutional policy)

Great accessibility work requires all three. Required is the foundation. Needed centers the student. Right calls on your professional judgement.

Models of Disability in our Work

How we understand disability shapes how we respond to students. Neither model alone tells the full story – and skilled practitioners draw from both.

The Medical Model

- Focuses on diagnosis and functional limitations
- Centers documentation and eligibility
- Drives accommodation processes
- Defines the student by what they cannot do

The Social Model

- Focuses on environmental and systemic barriers
- Centers inclusion and access design
- Drives culture and campus partnership
- Asks what the environment fails to provide

Great accessibility work requires all three. Required is the foundation. Needed centers the student. Right calls on your professional judgement.

Looking for the Yes

Traditional Question

“Can we approve this?”

Starting from restriction – what policy allows, what documentation proves, what precedent exists.

Accessibility Question

“How can we make this work?”

Starting from possibility – what barriers exist, what options remain unexplored, who else can help.

Looking for the yes means bringing **curiosity, exploration, collaboration, and creativity** to every case. It means beginning with possibility – not permission.

Important clarification: Looking for the yes does not mean saying yes. It means you begin every case with possibility before you land on limitations.

The Straightforward Case

Consider a common accommodation request where documentation clearly supports the need, the barrier is well understood, and an established accommodation directly addresses it.

What is Required?

What do ADA, Section 504, and institutional policy obligate us to provide in this situation?

What is Needed?

What is the student's actual barrier? What outcome are they trying to achieve? What does success look like?

What is Right?

Does the accommodation address the barrier with integrity? Is this equitable, reasonable, and student-centered?

Debrief: In straightforward cases, all three elements align. The framework confirms the path forward and builds practitioner confidence and consistency.

The Three Lights Framework

When student narrative, documentation, and law and policy all point in the same direction, the path forward is clear. When they diverge, we need tools for navigating complexity.

Green Light

Alignment exists. Student narrative, documentation, and law/policy all support the same direction. Move forward with confidence.

Yellow Light

More discussion needed. Elements are partially aligned. Gather more information, consult with the student, or seek peer input.

Red Light

Further exploration required. Significant tension between elements. Consult supervisors, legal, or colleagues before proceeding.

The three inputs – **Student Narrative, Documentation, and Law and Policy** – must each be considered. This framework helps answer: What is required? What is needed? What is right?

The Gray Area

Consider a realistic accommodation request where some evidence exists, the barrier is the only partially understood, and reasonable professionals may arrive at different conclusions. **This is where professional judgment matters most.**

At Your Table: Discuss

Required? What does the law and policy clearly mandate – and where does it leave room for interpretation?

At Your Table: Discuss

Needed? What is the student's experience of the barrier? What are they really asking for?

At Your Table? Discuss

Right? Given all you know, what does your professional judgement tell you? What would you do – and why?

Debrief: There may not be a single correct answer here. Gray areas are where professional judgement, ethical reasonings, and student-centered practice intersect.

Gatekeeper vs Guide

The words we choose signal to students whether they are being evaluated – or supported. Language shapes belonging before any decision is ever made.

Gatekeeper Language

- *“Prove it.”*
- *“Submit more documentation.”*
- *“That’s our policy.”*
- *“We cannot do that.”*

Signals: suspicion, barrier, finality, institutional authority over the student.

Reflection: How does the language we use – In person, in letters, in email – influence whether a student feels they belong in our office?

Guide Language

- *“Tell me more.”*
- *“Let’s explore options.”*
- *“What outcomes are you seeking?”*
- *“Who else can help us?”*

Signals: curiosity, partnership, possibility, shared investment in the student’s success.

Faculty Partnerships: Compliance vs Culture

How we approach faculty shapes whether accessibility becomes a shared value or a contested obligation. Accessibility culture cannot live solely within the disability services office.

Compliance-Based Conversation

“Here is the accommodation letter. The student is entitled to these supports. Please implement them.”

Positions DS as enforcer. Creates transactional, sometimes adversarial, faculty relationships

Culture-Based Conversation

“Let’s talk about how this student learns and what access looks like in your course”

Positions DS as partner. Creates collaborative, trust-based relationships centered on student access.

Faculty partnerships require **curiosity, communication, collaboration, and shared responsibility**. When faculty understand the *why* behind access, they become accessibility advocates – not reluctant compliance participants.

Belonging is Not Approval (1)

You Can Deny and Still Belong

A student whose request is denied – but who feels heard, respected, and treated fairly – can still experience belonging. The process matters as much as the outcome.

You Can Approve and Still Exclude

A student whose request is approved – but who felt dismissed, disbelieved, or dehumanized – has experienced exclusion despite receiving the accommodation.

Students remember whether they were **heard, respected, treated fairly, and valued**. They remember the experience of interacting with your office long after the accommodation letter is forgotten.

Belonging is created through **process, communication, and relationship** – not simply through outcomes.

Belonging is Not Approval (2)

You Can Deny and Still Belong

A student whose request is denied – but who feels heard, respected, and treated fairly – can still experience belonging. The process matters as much as the outcome.

You Can Approve and Still Exclude

A student whose request is approved – but who felt dismissed, disbelieved, or dehumanized – has experienced exclusion despite receive the accommodation.

Students remember whether they were **heard, respected, treated fairly, and valued**. They remember the experience of interacting with your office long after the accommodation letter is forgotten.

Belonging is created through **process, communication, and relationship** – not simply through outcomes.

The Difficult Case

Consider a complex accommodation request involving significant concerns, potential fundamental alteration issues, competing institutional and student interests, and no obvious solution. **This is the work we actually do.**

What is Required?

Where does law clearly speak – and where does it leave space for institutional discretion and professional interpretation?

What is Needed?

What is the student's genuine barrier and desired outcome?
Have we fully explored what access would actually look like for this person?

What is Right?

Given the complexity, competing values, and human stakes – what does your best professional judgement tell you?

Debrief: Accessibility work often lives in complexity rather than certainty. The absence of a clear answer is not a failure – it is the reality of meaningful professional judgement.

Things I Wish Someone Told Me My First Year

A few honest truths for every disability services professional – new and seasoned alike.

- You will not remove every barrier – **and that is not a measure of your worth or effort.**
- Documentation will not answer every question – **your professional judgement will have to carry the rest**
- You can deny a request and still be completely, genuinely, **student-centered**
- Students will sometimes be frustrated, and faculty will sometimes disagree – **this is part of the work, not a sign you are doing it wrong.**
- The law is the floor, not the goal – **your job is to build upward from there.**
- Accessibility is relational work – **and relationships require time, trust, and presence.**

Operationalizing Culture

Culture is not built in a single workshop or policy revision. It is built one process, one conversation, and one interaction at a time.

Choose One Process In Your Office

- Student intake and initial meeting
- Documentation review process
- Faculty outreach and communication
- Testing center procedures
- Student-facing written communication

Ask Yourself Honestly

Does this process prioritize **compliance, belonging, or both?** Where is the gap between what you want students to experience?

What is **one concrete change** you can make before the end of this semester?

Action Step: Write it down. Share it with a colleague. Commit to one small change that shifts your office one degree closer to culture.

Tomorrow Morning

When the next student walks through your door, you will face the same three questions – in every case, every day, every year.

1. **What is Right?**
2. **What is Needed?**
3. **What is Required?**

Compliance creates access. Culture creates belonging. Belonging creates engagement.

Accessibility professionals help students navigate the space between access and belonging

Raymond Anderson, MBA, MA. Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Prescott Campus
[Framework handout](#). [Reflection Worksheet](#). [Contact information available via QR code](#).

Session Evaluation

tiny.cc/8zu1101

Thank you for attending!

Your feedback helps shape future programming.

