RUTGERS HEALTH

Office of Disability Services

Spring 2025 Newsletter

Hello from the Rutgers Health Office of Disability Services!

The RH (formerly RBHS) Office of Disability Services (RHODS) provides the necessary tools, resources and support for disabled students to become responsible decision-makers and self-advocates in charge of their own future.

Let us know if you woud like additional information or a presentation in your course

We invite your feedback

Disabled students are badly served by furore over 'unfair' accommodations

Misleading claims that some undergraduates are unjustly receiving extra help obscure how many universities are actually failing to provide sufficient support to disabled students, says Chris Pepin-Neff (Times Higher Ed)

(Note: although this article is out of Australia, the US grapples with the same issues, and the study noted in the article is from Providence Rhode Island)

The idea that "accommodations have gone wild" – with too many disabled students receiving too many disability accommodations – is a critique that some are keen to make, with such claims usually accompanied by accusations of wokeness overpowering academic integrity.

As someone who has been a student with a disability at the University of Sydney, then a faculty disability liaison officer there, and is today associate dean of student affairs, overseeing 17,000 students in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, I can state categorically that this idea is much closer to a moral panic narrative than reality. In fact, there is compelling evidence to suggest disabled students remain significantly disadvantaged by university systems and structures that impose administrative burdens and literal obstacles in their way, making the full university experience inaccessible for these students.

This type of misunderstanding arose recently in a *Times Higher Education* piece by Justin Noia, from Providence College in Rhode Island, which suggested that disability accommodations imperilled assessment and credentials that follow presented a deceptive sense of an individual's ability.

He would seem to have students like me in mind. My disability includes being neurodivergent, which is described by Griffith University psychologist Chris Edwards as "brain functioning that is different from the majority and encompasses conditions such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia". Part of the moral panic described by Dr Noia attempts to essentialise and isolate cognitive or potentially invisible disabilities from more visible disabilities. The idea seems to be that an explosion of both less serious, potentially fraudulent, and simultaneously disqualifying intellectual conditions are undermining exam-taking by requiring accommodations such as more time.

This is problematic for many reasons. In 2019, I helped lead a survey of arts students at the University of Sydney with disabilities. Of the 28 per cent of arts students in the survey that identified that they had a disability, 79 per cent of those lived with an additional disability. Therefore, the type or conditions of a disability cannot be conveniently separated from the person with the disability, the array of obstacles introduced to tax their lived experience, or how they move through the world.

In 2022, I conducted an additional smaller survey (*n*=156) of those in my school who were living with a disability, of whom 75 per cent were students and 25 per cent were staff. Of these respondents, 13 per cent stated that they were living with a disability. Those in academia know this is an undercount. I asked if the students with a disability had accessed any available university resources. Of these, 8 per cent had accessed assistive technologies, and 10 per cent had accessed a Disability Support Fund.

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Unlocked: A Conversation with Emily Grossman *written by Jenna Rose*

For many students, college experience includes cramming for exams, joining campus groups, dinner with friends in the dining hall, and maybe pulling the occasional all-nighter. For Emily Grossman, Rutgers alum, her time in college included all of the standard college milestones, while also navigating being in and out of a treatment for bipolar disorder. Emily shares her journey, and the lessons she learned along the way in **Unlocked: 25 Keys to Recovering from Depression, Anxiety or Bipolar Disorder.** Her book is separated into 25 vignettes from her early adulthood, with each anecdote connecting to one of her 25 keys to living in recovery from her diagnosis. Some keys include find your people, trust your instincts, find your mentors, ride the waves, find happiness within, and many more.

Emily currently works as a Senior Training and Consultant Specialist within the Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation at the Rutgers School of Health Professions. Emily was a teacher before transitioning to becoming a Peer Specialist, or a professional with lived experience with a mental health diagnosis who is trained to provide support for others with mental health disorders. In her book, she discusses some of the supports she received from Rutgers faculty and staff when she was a student, and had some guidance for faculty and staff looking to support students who may disclose a mental health condition.

"It's important to really listen to them and show a lot of concern and compassion…let them know that there's no shame in this. It's not their fault…a lot of students I work with are very self-blaming…it's very hard when your mind is telling you that you're messing up...I always like to tell people to start with a lot of validation and a lot of compassion. Then, don't try to solve the problem yourself, there are a lot of excellent resources for students right here at Rutgers, including the Office of Disability Services, which really saved my college career."

A component of Emily's story is her ability to build resiliency, a skill that many mentors hope to instill in students. Emily shared a few thoughts for how to build resilience in others "When I was going through the worst of my struggles, I was really hungry to hear stories of people that had gone through really difficulty things and recovered. Regardless of what that difficult thing was. I think repeatedly telling people examples of stories of people that didn't give up and got what they wanted."

Emily shared that many young adults may not have a lot of personal examples of overcoming adversity just yet. "I have the benefit of being an adult and having seen myself go through ups and downs. Meet them where they are and even self-disclosing, sharing your own journeys…maybe not related to mental health, but times where you were really struggling and got through, so they know they're not alone. Keep reminding them that you're going to hold on to hope for them when they don't have it for themselves…you're going to believe in them until they believe in themselves…validating [students] for the small things that they're doing well...progress is small, and they're not going to see it right away. If you can share with them the small changes you're seeing, that can lead up to a big change. That's really important"

Emily's personal journey to recovery includes meditation, routine, and a strong belief system in a higher power. Like any other type of habits, meditation is one that requires practice and repetition. Most people associate the practice of meditation with stillness and silence, but Emily explains that there are multiple types of meditation practice. This practice may be focusing on breath, repeating a mantra, walking, or swimming. Anything that involves focusing on the activity at hand assists in focusing the mind. "There are many different ways to meditate, and the key is you're focused on a fixed thought or practice…and when your mind wanders, that's okay. Bring it back to that point or that mantra…and find [a practice] that works for you and carve out just five minutes a day for it that you can do consistently and that's enough to get started."

For those who struggle with establishing the habit of meditating, Emily explained that all hope is not lost if you miss a day of your routine. "You don't have to throw out the baby with the bathwater…in order to build the muscle of being present, the mind needs repetitiveness, just like doing reps at the gym. So all of that strength training that is meditation builds up over time whether you are perfectly consistent or not."

Emily keeps a journal where she writes out a list of things she's hoping will change as she meditates. "I look back at the journal six months down the road, 10 months down the road, and I see all of these amazing changes that have happened…and I could now have done that without meditation, and that actual proof convinces me to keep going."

For Emily, routine is an important part of living in recovery, and part of her routine includes being sure to structure fun into her life, as well as rest. "Rest is very important with a mental health condition...I'm learning how to set healthier boundaries to get better rest...and fun goes on my calendar, because otherwise I don't do it...and I need fun to be more productive."

An integral part of setting boundaries for Emily is learning to let go of the habit of wanting to control everything, even others. "I'm learning to really know that every person in my life that's important to me has their own path to walk, and they're going to do the things the way they need to do it for themselves...letting people in your life figure it out for themselves rather than trying to get overly involved. That's important as a mental health provider."

Read more about Emily's story in **Unlocked: 25 Keys to Recovering from Depression, Anxiety or Bipolar Disorder.**

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But the highest response rate at 32 per cent was, “I have not accessed these resources.” The panic in higher education should be focused not on the few students with a disability who access supportive accommodations to get through their studies but on the many who do not. ***If universities abandon their duty of care and decide that disabled students deserve less than the nothing that they usually receive, we have all lost our way.***

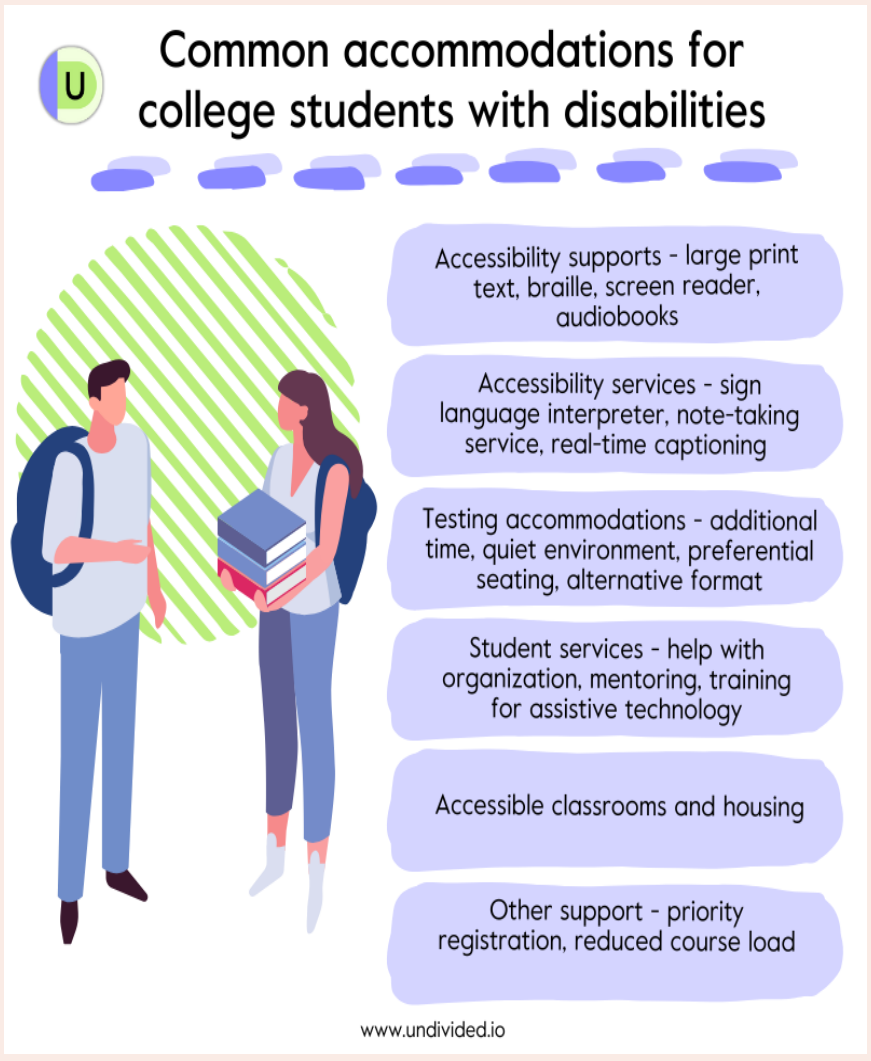
A final question in my survey asked students with a disability to what extent they felt supported by the school. While it was important that about 60 per cent felt supported or better, 17 per cent chose “neither supported nor unsupported”. It is common knowledge that some professors do not record their lectures, and others put their lecture slides up after the lecture has occurred, which can mean that students who need visual assistance struggle, and this is all under the hope that the classroom in which the course is being held is not an old academic building without a (functioning) elevator or ramps.

It is here that I reach agreement with Dr Noia on the central point that “giving some students more help than others undermines” the credentials that universities provide. He’s right; however, I would argue that credentialling is, in fact, endangered by the existing unfairness faced by students with disabilities. Universities need to centre students with disabilities in our communities and educational environments as well as ensure equity in resource allocations and course tasks. My belief is that students with disabilities are wonderful and that they often teach us much more than we ever teach them.

However, my chief opposition to Dr Noia’s proposition extends to both equity and academic integrity.

A central flaw in the argument of opposing these student accommodations is not just that they would take specific accommodations away, which would inevitably take certain students away. It is, in fact, an overarching concession that lecturers and professors cannot determine if a student with a disability is qualified to pass or fail their course. If the argument is that disability accommodations are yet another element of the woke agenda and that this wave of wokeness has overpowered academics to such an extent that we cannot be trusted to exercise discretion in the classroom, in marking, in designing assessments (and in reaching accommodations for dozens of students on dozens of different issues each semester), then the accommodations are not the problem, we are.

It is worth mentioning specifically that there are lots of accommodations for different types of students in academia, and when used appropriately I am in total support. In 2018, Gomez, Bradley, and Conway studied elite student athletes and noted, “Over one-third of universities are able to offer access to academic courses via reduced academic requirements.” Again, accommodations are not the problem, highlighting the accommodations that students with disabilities receive apart from all others places a marginalised group further on the margins.



Finally, the argument that academics know what the “real world” is like, better than those living with a disability, who face the job market every day, does not pass the pub test. People with disabilities are equipped to bring their authentic selves to their jobs, and their studies.

My hope is that this important conversation stirs university action to redouble accommodations, to help more students with disabilities and ensure equal opportunity. There is nothing more deceptive in the pursuit of knowledge than the idea that it only fits one type of person.

Common accommodations:

- Accessibility Supports: large print, Braille, Screen Reader, Audiobooks
- Accessibility Services: Sign language interpreter, note-taking service, real-time captioning
- Testing accommodations: extra time; reduced distraction, preferred seating, alternate format
- Accessible classrooms and housing
- Other resources: assistive technology, priority registration and reduced courseload

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No Research About Us Without Us

Research labs benefit if faculty are inclusive of students with disabilities, a group of scholars and students committed to inclusive lab practices write.

By Shannon Locke , Emma E. Ellison , Taylor Geneux , Szymon Ślusarz-Kowalczyk , Rebecca K. Roberts , Hannah Sean Ellefritz , Dara Shifrer , Jenna Gorlewicz and Jessica Rodrigues

Scholars and educators conduct research that impacts students with disabilities. But do students with disabilities have an impact on the research?

Not nearly enough. Data suggests that students with disabilities are underrepresented in college research experiences, and they are often missing as contributing knowledge producers and from research opportunities. To ensure research in technology, medicine and education that is relevant and meaningful for people with disabilities, **it is especially important to include their voices in the research design process as contributing researchers, not just study participants.** Involving disabled students in research early and often brings a new and unique perspective to addressing problems and answering questions. Research has also demonstrated—and scholars have recommended—that increasing inclusion of people with disabilities in workplace settings enhances innovation and creative problem-solving for everyone.

Young people with disabilities increasingly matriculate into higher education, with about 20 percent of undergraduates in the U.S. reporting a disability to their college. Students' participation in research is an important predictor of persistence in higher education, as it enriches their overall college experience and validates the importance and relevance of what they are learning. Yet many institutional and social barriers hinder the inclusion of students with disabilities in research and in subsequent opportunities in the scientific workforce.

As scholars and students working in inclusive research labs across three university campuses—the Mathematics Potential Lab at the University of Missouri at Columbia, the Career Analysts research lab at Portland State University and the CHROME (Collaborative Haptics, Robotics and Mechatronics) Lab at Saint Louis University—we offer experiences and recommendations below for reducing barriers to disabled student participation in research labs through impactful, intentionally inclusive practices.

How to Involve Disabled Students in Your Research Lab

While it seems obvious that research that is specifically about disability should involve disabled researchers, a diverse group of researchers is important for any research project so that the outputs and products are relevant and meaningful to all members of our diverse population. Below is an actionable list of advice for faculty to recruit disabled students and to create accessible and inclusive research experiences that support their students' success. These tips are relevant for research in any field.options and provide accommodations as needed (e.g., in-person or Zoom participation, multiple lighting and seating options, individual opportunities to

1. Intentional invitations: Be intentional in inviting students with disabilities to get involved in your lab by, for example, collaborating with the campus disability center to promote open lab positions.

2. Interview ingenuity: Acknowledge that difficulty interviewing does not reflect a student's work ethic or academic efficacy. Consider alternatives to the typical interview format (e.g., provide interview questions in advance or publish them in the chat during an online interview to reduce participant anxiety, review past work or portfolios, offer a trial opportunity to participate in the lab, accept faculty references or recommendations, or set up a scenario-based activity to observe performance).

3. Accessibility and accommodations: Familiarize yourself with accessibility (personalize spaces, accessible text formatting, etc). See Barbara Sandland et al. for further suggestions. Universally designing a supportive and collaborative culture within the lab are critical to an inclusive lab experience.

4. Rapport and relationships: Ask preferences (e.g., person-first or identity-first language), empower disclosure and self-advocacy, and make time to ask students about their preferences regarding how they do their best work.

5. Prioritize participation: Learn more about inclusion and disability before, during and after you decide to recruit students with disabilities. Create an inclusive environment and implement inclusive practices such as alternative communication modalities and seating options. Set up routines that provide all students in your labs equal opportunities to participate and express themselves. Ensure that students with disabilities are welcomed as equal contributors to the research being conducted and given autonomy to complete tasks and participate to their level of comfort. The Association of College and University Educators offers additional inclusive teaching practices in higher education.

6. Normalize neurodiversity/disability diversity: Use a universal design lens when generating the lab structure, activities, environment, etc. Involve your students with disabilities to the same extent that you involve other students. Think empathetically rather than sympathetically (i.e., employ a disability-pride lens rather than a deficit lens) and recognize research contributions by everyone through a lens of equity rather than equality. For example, not everyone in your lab (equally) will need access to text-to-voice assistive technology to enable their active participation in activities like literature reviews. However, students with vision impairment or light sensitivity may need that service to enable them to participate equitably. In other

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words, the assistive technology would level the playing field between disabled and nondisabled researchers for activities that take many hours of screen time. Voice-to-text tools might be preferable for everyone but are only necessary for specific individuals to be able to get the job done. Access to accommodations is not a reflection of fairness as through an equality lens; rather it is a reflection of necessity for some through an equity lens of engagement

Students' Perspectives

For disabled students, participation in research labs may seem like a nonoption without role models or examples of others like themselves who have been involved in research labs before. Taylor, an undergraduate lab participant—and co-author of this article—explained it this way: "As a woman in STEM, a lot of the labs in STEM are very tedious. Yesterday, I thought I was going to explode because I had an academic lab [for a college-level course] … I just didn't really feel like there was a lot of space for me accommodation-wise, and I didn't really feel like the motivators that would make me perform well were there." Taylor's experience felt overwhelming and lacking in educational opportunities in her area of interest.

Szymon, another co-author and undergraduate lab participant, explained that he had not been involved in STEM research before, despite having an interest, because it was hard to find opportunities that did not require prior research experience. "And if you don't have experience," Szymon said, "then it's really difficult to get started doing anything valuable. It's like, I could work in a lab sweeping floors but that's not, you know, that's not what I want to be doing."

Misrepresentation or misconceptions about research also created a barrier to participation, as another co-author and lab participant, Emma, explained: "For me, it was definitely very, very scary starting out, because all that I had heard people talk about research is that it was super high pressure. Lots of deadlines, lots of work to do. And I already, like, struggle, especially academically."

When asked how they found out about and got involved in a research lab on campus, the common denominator was an invitation. Each student reported finding out about the opportunity through an invitation either from a trusted friend or faculty member or a recruitment email that came from the campus disability center. Without a clear history of inclusion in research labs, students with disabilities may not realize research opportunities exist to pursue on their own.

The students unanimously cited the deliberate efforts of the Mathematics Potential Lab at the University of Missouri to recruit students with disabilities as the impetus for them to give a position in the lab a try. The fact that the lab adviser (and co-author of this piece), Jessica Rodrigues, "wanted to hire from the disability sector" and was "actively looking for students with disabilities" gave Emma "the impression that J. Rod, as she is affectionately known, and this entire team would be accommodating … knowing that there might be more accommodation and understanding for, I guess my situation, was definitely something that made me feel a lot better about entering the research world."

Taylor also confirmed, "Yeah, that was the selling point … I also felt like I was actually bringing something to the table insight-wise." Co-author Kate also said, "You don't see a lot of individuals with disabilities or even talking about disabilities in the higher education community, so I was interested in the lab and reached out."

These student comments reinforce the importance of casting a wide net for recruitment across venues and formats on campus, including the disability office, campus social activism events, research spaces and diversity, equity and inclusion spaces and activities. Emails, posters, outreach initiatives, going to talk to freshman classes and sending information to advisers to recommend their students were just a few of the creative suggestions shared by our co-authors. Be clear in recruitment materials that the lab is not seeking disabled research subjects but instead is seeking actively involved researchers with disabilities. Finally, co-authors expressed that no one really wants to use their disability as an avenue to be included, so promote the real intention behind recruiting students with disabilities and creating an accommodating environment: to seek diverse perspectives and lived experiences to build a robust and creative research team.

For more information on this topic: Increasing the Participation of Students with Disabilities in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics: Lessons Learned and Resources from NSF's RDE Projects

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RH Office of Disability Services

Mission

The Office of Disability Services is dedicated to the philosophy that all Rutgers University students are assured equal opportunity, access and participation in the University's courses, programs, activities, services and facilities. We recognize that diverse abilities are a source of strength, empowerment, and enrichment for the entire university community and we are committed to the elimination of physical, instructional, and attitudinal barriers by promoting awareness and understanding throughout the university community.

Our Vision

The Office of Disability Services at Rutgers Health strives to become a model program for students with disabilities in higher education. We are committed to developing a comprehensively accessible and universally designed University that nurtures the full participation and contribution of every individual. Our team strives to provide the necessary tools, resources and supports for individuals with disabilities to become responsible decision-makers and self-advocates in charge of their own future. We envision a campus community where all individuals are welcomed, valued, and encouraged to be contributing members.

Steps to Request Accommodations:

1. Complete and submit the Registration Form:

Upon completion of this form, you will receive a confirmation email of your submission

2. Schedule an initial meeting:

Upon receipt of the registration form, a representative from ODS will contact you to schedule an intake meeting. This meeting can be conducted in person, by video call, or by phone.

3. Submit appropriate documentation:

On or before your intake meeting, please submit the appropriate documentation that meets ODS guidelines for your disability

4. **Upon completion of your intake, ODS will review your documentation**.

Students will receive a response in a timely manner with one of the following application statuses:

A. Reasonable accommodation request approved
B. More information needed
C. Accommodation not approved and why

5. Once approved, you must request your Letters of Accommodations to alert your faculty or program of your accommodations.

Complete the Letter of Accommodation Request Form

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Rutgers Health
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Providing Equal Access

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