

Using Simulated Meetings to Practice Advocating for Disability-Related Accommodations (Practice Brief)

Justin E. Freedman¹
Casey L. Woodfield¹
Benjamin H. Dotger²

Abstract

Research suggests that students' encounters with professors can be a barrier to students fully accessing disability-related accommodations. This paper describes the use of a clinical simulation as a practice to understand and support how students engage with professors in discussions about disability-related accommodations. The authors detail the use of a simulated meeting with 28 students across two universities, during which they engaged in discussion about accommodations with trained actor-portrayed professors. These simulations were video-recorded and followed by group and individual reflective discussions, which provide students opportunities to review and reflect on their meeting. The authors report the design and implementation of this practice, observations about relational dynamics, and students' evaluations of the authenticity and benefits of the simulation as a learning activity. This simulation approach is recommended as a unique opportunity for practice and reflection that can support students and faculty to work towards meaningful access to accommodations in postsecondary education.

Keywords: accommodations, situated practice, simulated meeting, self-advocacy, professors

While postsecondary institutions set processes for accessing disability-related accommodations that can vary, students are generally expected to disclose a disability identity in multiple ways. First, they must register as a student with a disability at their postsecondary school. This involves providing documentation of the disability and working with staff in the postsecondary school's disability services office to determine accommodations (Keenan et al., 2019). Students are then expected to communicate their eligibility for disability-related accommodations to individual professors for the courses in which they enroll. Students typically provide professors, either through face-to-face encounters or email, with a letter from the disability services office that outlines their accommodations (Cole & Cawthon, 2015).

The use of accommodations in postsecondary education has been associated with increased grade point averages (Kim & Lee, 2016), and higher rates of graduation (Salzer et al., 2008). Yet, Newman and Madaus (2015) found that only 35% of students who received K-12 special education services self-identified as having a disability once enrolled in postsec-

ondary education. Previous research suggested that encounters with professors, or even the thought of discussing accommodations with them, is a barrier to students accessing accommodations. Cole and Cawthon (2015) found that students' initial impressions of professors influenced if and how they disclosed their disability identity in a given course. Lyman and colleagues (2016) found that negative interactions with faculty members, and the desire not to be treated differently than others, contributed to students not seeking to use accommodations. This research suggested a concerning trend – that the expectation that students communicate with professors about accommodations contributes to the large numbers of students who do not disclose their disability in postsecondary settings.

Description of the Problem

Postsecondary schools continue to rely on a retrofitting approach to meeting the needs of students with disabilities by implementing accommodations on an individual basis in the form of services and academic adjustments to existing classroom structures (Dol-

mage, 2017). While some postsecondary institutions have begun to embrace universal design approaches, such as flexible policies and proactive supports to replace the need for many (but not all) accommodations, students continue to shoulder the burden of advocacy. Recognizing the reality of this current context, it is important for students to be prepared to discuss their needs and accommodations once enrolled in postsecondary education.

This paper describes a practice aimed at supporting students to engage with professors in discussions about disability-related accommodations. A clinical simulation is a form of practice-based learning that has been adapted from medical education to provide a low-risk opportunity for students to engage in, and reflect upon, a critical dialogue. Simulations involve placing individuals in a realistic context to meet face-to-face with a standardized individual (SI) – an actor who has been trained to portray a character, such as a teacher, parent, or professor (Dotger, 2015).

Participant Demographics and Institutional Partners/Resources

The simulated meeting protocol was designed in partnership with university staff members and students at a medium-sized private university in the northeastern United States (Figure 1). Five staff members within the Disability Services Office, including four counselors who work with hundreds of students, were interviewed and asked to describe the typical accommodations process. Staff members were also invited to describe previous interactions with faculty members, including language faculty members have used when discussing the accommodations. Staff responses were used to develop an initial protocol (i.e., script) to guide the actor-portrayed professor through a meeting with a student to discuss disability-related accommodations.

Four university students with disabilities subsequently participated in a focus group to evaluate this protocol draft. In this session, students described commonalities in demeanors and actions of professors based on prior experiences in meetings about their accommodations. Students also critiqued scripted statements that the actor-portrayed professor might express in the simulation. Focus group data contributed to further protocol revisions, to yield a simulation script and training for actors that were more authentic than the original draft and rooted in the lived experiences of students. To date, two groups have participated in simulated meetings to discuss accommodations utilizing this protocol. The first group comprised 15 students from the same medium-sized private univer-

sity that was the site of the simulation protocol design. The second group included 13 students from a medium-sized public university in the Northeastern United States. Table 1 describes self-identified demographics for the 28 students.

Description of Practice

In line with the use of clinical simulations in medical and teacher education (Dotger, 2015), this practice involves training actors to portray a standardized individual (SI). Using the collaboratively developed protocol described above, the authors trained local area actors to play the part of the character—Professor Williams—in a consistent manner. Across both sites, the two-hour training was delivered by researchers, and included the following elements:

1. Background about accommodations processes at the university.
2. Introduction to characteristics of Professor Williams: a supportive, experienced faculty member who is generally concerned about students' success, and sometimes makes suggestions about how students might utilize their accommodations.
3. Protocol review, including each scripted verbal cue that SIs are asked to memorize and be prepared to deliver in response to students' references to various accommodations.
4. Practice with "what if" scenarios and discussion to reach agreement on a set of consistent responses to potential questions and concerns that students might raise.

The use of SIs, rather than actual educators (e.g., professors), was intentional. SIs are carefully trained to consistently enact a set of verbalizations and non-verbal mannerisms that allow each student to navigate essentially the same questions, concerns, and dispositions. The researchers' goal was for all students to engage with the same faculty perspective, decisions, and questions, and to reflect upon this shared experience individually and as a group. Trained actors are accustomed to learning and presenting a given persona deliberately, holding constant their own contexts, perspectives, and opinions. Working on multiple simulations with a medical university's simulation center at one of the two sites for this study, the research team learned that using actual educators can put the standardization and consistency of the experience at risk, as they communicate their own personal perspective, instead of relying on scripted verbalizations and mannerisms of the character. The

same could reasonably be expected if actual professors were used as professors in simulated discussions about accommodations.

Participating students receive comparatively limited information in preparation for the simulated meeting. One week in advance, students receive a one-page description of the simulated meeting context. This document introduces the scenario: it is early in the semester and they are visiting Professor Williams' office to provide their letter of accommodations. To enhance authenticity, the document names an actual university course and a list of assignments in the syllabus which could potentially influence the relevance of certain accommodations. On the day of the scheduled meeting, participants are reminded that this is designed to be a simulated experience, that the individual with whom they are meeting is a trained actor, not an actual professor, and that the meeting will be video recorded. The implementation of the simulation protocol and follow-up discussions adheres to the following format: (1) students enter individual rooms to meet with the SI, Professor Williams; (2) immediately after their conversations conclude, students participate in a small-group discussion facilitated by one of the researchers in which they describe initial reactions to the experience; and (3) in the week following, students are invited back for individual interviews to watch and reflect upon the video of their simulated meeting.

These practices were conducted at two universities with different contexts and students, summarized in Table 2. In the first study, use of existing simulation facilities and actors familiar with the process made the logistics of the practice nearly seamless. In the second study, simulation was embedded into an annual three-day transition program for incoming freshmen. This allowed for comparatively more time with student participants. However, actors were recruited via a theater department alumni network and departmental electronic mailing list; none of them had previous experience conducting a simulated meeting.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

Twenty-eight students from two universities participated in the simulated meeting, followed immediately by a small group discussion. Sixteen of these students returned to individually watch and discuss the video of their simulated meeting with one of the researchers. Videos of the meetings, paired with students' reflections, provided a unique opportunity to observe the dynamics between a student and professor as they discussed accommodations, and insight into the benefits and limitations of the simulation as a learning activity.

The Unintended Consequences of a Professor's Statements

Watching and discussing the video of the simulated meeting was an opportunity for students to reflect on how they interpreted specific questions and statements that Professor Williams expressed. For example, Scott shared frustration that Professor Williams offered specific suggestions about using accommodations, such as the proposal that he take exams in class rather than at the Disability Services Office. He explained, "I feel like he could have said it better, in a more supportive way [such as] 'at the end of the day, do whatever you need.'"

Other participants provided further examples of how Professor Williams' comments conveyed negative meanings, even if unintended. Brian described feeling that Professor Williams was insinuating that he would miss key information, and receive a lower grade, if he completed exams at the Disability Services Office. Arlene reflected that Professor Williams' statement that she didn't think Arlene "will have any problems" in class may have been intended to alleviate worry. However, Arlene noted that coming from a Professor, this statement carried an authoritative connotation, as if she "*shouldn't* have a problem in this class." Arlene explained that this "unintended consequence" made her question whether she would feel comfortable raising concerns in the future. Such responses demonstrate that while the character and script for Professor Williams was intended to be supportive of accommodations, students experienced and interpreted some statements as oppositional, negatively connotative, or as having notable ramifications.

(Un)realistic Aspects of the Simulation

Several students expressed that the ways they described themselves and their accommodations were representative of what they actually say to their professors, even if some initially felt nervous. Karen explained that she "had no problems being myself . . . the way I was describing items on my letter and just interacting with her conversationally was just really close to how I do." Others described feeling that the specific concerns that Professor Williams raised about an accommodation were realistic. Some students shared that Professor Williams' suggestion to complete exams in class, as opposed to at the Disability Services Office, was one that they had previously encountered, or considered. Other students felt that Professor Williams talked more than a typical professor. For example, Arlene shared that, "It's the longest conversation I've ever had with a professor about my accommodations. I feel like it's usually shorter." Elissa reflected that, "He was chattier than a normal

professor.” Other students indicated that the simulation was not totally authentic because they typically talked to professors about accommodations after class, as opposed to visiting their office.

Students’ Perceived Benefits of the Experience

Several students spoke about the insights they gained and benefits of the simulated meeting experience. Allison, a first semester freshman, explained how she planned to change her approach to discussing accommodations with professors:

After having this simulation, I think that I would be more, not firm, but leaving it less up in the air regarding taking it [the exam] in a separate testing space or also with receiving the PowerPoint notes the day after instead of the day before. And I also think I would definitely like to look at my own accommodations more so I would feel more comfortable talking about it and be able to answer her questions in a more detailed and efficient manner.

Students spoke most often about the benefits of being able to watch the video of how they engaged with Professor Williams in the simulation. Mark explained that he was able to observe “from a different perspective” how he discussed his disabilities. Karen shared that watching the video allowed her to recognize how she tends to “over explain” when she feels nervous and defensive:

I knew I tend to ramble and explain and over explain and get on the defense, but it showed me how much more than I even knew I did...I’m so wrapped up in the emotion during the actual thing, that I’m not even able to take a step back and realize that I’m doing it...you are definitely able to see it, watching it over.

Reviewing their videos allowed students a unique opportunity to examine how they communicate when discussing accommodations, including their tone, emotions, and body language.

Implications and Portability

The use of a simulated meeting with a standardized professor provided a low-risk opportunity for students to practice advocating for their needs and disability-related accommodations. The students who participated in the simulation were representative of many of the disability categories of students at postsecondary institutions in the United States (Evans et al., 2017). However, the sample lacked racial diver-

sity, which limits an understanding of how intersecting identities may influence dynamics between students and faculty members. The researchers plan to recruit more racially diverse students, including by collaborating with two-year colleges to conduct the simulations.

The reflective elements of the experience, especially watching a video of their simulation, offered students space and time to evaluate their own tendencies and approaches to self-advocacy. Variations of the simulation described in this paper could be used as opportunities for postsecondary students to prepare for and reflect on how they articulate their needs, convey knowledge of resources, and advocate for their rights to use accommodations. Participation in and reflection on a simulated encounter with a professor could help students to become more aware of how they talk about their disability and accommodations, and consider changes to their approach in the future. The simulation context could also be adapted from a student-professor meeting to a conversation between a student and disability services staff member in which the student's needs, preferences, previous experiences, and documentation of disability are discussed.

Simulations could be used to support efforts to train faculty to meet the needs of students with disabilities. For example, the authors plan to conduct a future simulation that flips the context by constructing opportunities for professors to practice engaging in a meeting to discuss accommodations with a student. Another possible application is the use of excerpted transcripts of simulations as part of a faculty training about disability-related accommodations. Faculty could examine transcripts alongside participants’ reflections from the post-simulation interviews to gain insight into how students might react to a professor’s comments and questions. This practice might allow faculty members to reconsider how they express suggestions so as to avoid the aforementioned unintended consequences of students feeling pressured or coerced.

The situated practice of simulations is intended to support students to build confidence, experience, and preparedness in advocating for their needs and preferences. Yet, the need for such practice is indicative of circumstances that position students to negotiate for the use of accommodations with professors. Were it commonplace for professors to use accessible practices and flexible policies that anticipate diverse characteristics of students, the necessity of the practice described in this paper would not be so urgent. The researchers draw attention to this tension in present and future iterations of this practice by asking students to describe their ideal classroom: a space where

they feel comfortable to learn, engage, and participate actively. Attending to students' responses can provide added insight into the ways that practices might shift based on the priorities and experiences of a range of bodies/minds.

Simulations require an investment of resources, such as hiring and training actors, access to office space, and recording equipment. While a partnership with a medical university's existing simulation center would be ideal (e.g., initial simulation), simulations can be implemented using available university space, common recording technologies (e.g., tablets) and recruitment of local actors (e.g., second simulation). Protocols (i.e., actor scripts) should be developed in partnership with students with disabilities who experience navigating life with a disability and receiving accommodations. Simulation design should also balance authenticity and practicality in making decisions such as whether to conduct a meeting during office-hours, or an impromptu conversation at the end of a class session. While no simulated environment is completely authentic, the use of the simulation in this research appears to offer a beneficial opportunity for students to practice and reflect, as well as to provide insight into the context in which students advocate for accommodations.

References

- Cole, E. V., & Cawthon, S. W. (2015). Self-disclosure decisions of university students with learning disabilities. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 28*(2), 163-179.
- Dolmage, J. T. (2017). *Academic ableism: Disability and higher education*. East Lansing, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Dotger, B. H. (2015). Core pedagogy: Individual uncertainty, shared practice, formative ethos. *Journal of Teacher Education, 66*(3), 215-226.
- Evans, N. J., Broido, E. M., Brown, K. R., & Wilke, A. K. (2017). *Disability in higher education: A social justice approach*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Keenan, W. R., Madaus, J. W., Lombardi, A. R., & Dukes III, L. L. (2019). Impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act on documentation for students with disabilities in transition to college: Implications for practitioners. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals, 42*(1), 56-63.
- Kim, W. H., & Lee, J. (2016). The effect of accommodation on academic performance of college students with disabilities. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 60*(1), 40-50.
- Lyman, M., Beecher, M. E., Griner, D., Brooks, M., Call, J., & Jackson, A. (2016). What keeps students with disabilities from using accommodations in postsecondary education? A qualitative review. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 29*(2), 123-140.
- Newman, L. A., & Madaus, J. W. (2015). An analysis of factors related to receipt of accommodations and services by postsecondary students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education, 36*(4), 208-219.
- Salzer, M. S., Wick, L. C., & Rogers, J. A. (2008). Familiarity with and use of accommodations and supports among postsecondary students with mental illnesses. *Psychiatric Services, 59*(4), 370-375.

About the Authors

Justin E. Freedman earned his Ph.D. in Special Education and Disability Studies from Syracuse University. He is a former Special Education teacher and received Special Education services in New Jersey public schools as a child identified with a learning disability and ADHD. He is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary and Inclusive Education at Rowan University. He uses theoretical frameworks from the field of Disability Studies to research disability in postsecondary education, Universal Design for Learning and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). He can be reached by e-mail at: freedmanj@rowan.edu.

Casey L. Woodfield earned her Ph.D. in Special Education and Disability Studies from Syracuse University. She is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary and Inclusive Education at Rowan University. Her research uses Disability Studies-informed methodologies to understand inclusive education as a vehicle of social justice, and the experiences of students who use augmentative and alternative communication. She can be reached by email at: woodfield@rowan.edu.

Benjamin Dotger received his Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction from North Carolina State University. His public school experience includes service as a high school English teacher in North Carolina. He is currently Professor and Chair of the Department of Teaching & Leadership in the School of Education at Syracuse University. His research interests center on the design and study of clinical simulations in teacher and school leader preparation. He can be reached by email at: bdotger@syr.edu.

Table 1*Simulation Participants' Demographic Information*

Initial Simulation				
Name	Gender	Race	Year	Self-Reported Disability Identity
Allison	Female	White	Freshman	Testing anxiety; ADHD
Arlene	Female	White	Graduate	Physical health
Brian	Male	White	Freshman	Physical health
Caroline	Female	White	Freshman	Slow processing, learning disability
Chris	Male	White	Senior	ADHD
Elissa	Female	White	Junior	ADHD; Mild dyslexia
Jared	Male	White	Freshman	ADHD
Karen	Female	White	Senior	Generalized anxiety; Obsessive Compulsive Disorder; ADHD combined type
Kimberly	Female	White	Sophomore	Hearing impaired
Marissa	Female	White	Sophomore	Learning disability
Mark	Male	Hispanic	Freshman	Learning disability, dyslexia, auditory processing
Nick	Male	White	Freshman	ADHD
Nora	Female	White	Freshman	Testing anxiety
Sam	Male	Asian	Senior	Mental health
Scott	Male	White	Junior	ADHD
Second Implementation of Simulation				
Name	Gender	Race	Year	Self-Reported Disability Identity
Aaron	Male	White	Freshman	Auditory Processing Disorder
Adrian	Cisgender Male	White	Sophomore	Autism, ADD
Chris	Male	Caucasian	Freshman	Spinal Cord Injury C6C7
Derrick	Male, questioning my gender	White	Freshman	Asperger, ADHD (I think)
Chad	Male	White	Fall Freshman	Depression, anxiety, Asperger syndrome bipolar, dark thoughts, possible eating disorder
Danielle	Female	Caucasian/White	First year, Grad	Dyslexia, processing delay, learning disability
Jacey	Female	White	Freshman	ADD
Joanna	Female	White	Freshman	Anxiety, Autism
Gerry	Gender fluid	Caucasian	Senior	Asperger syndrome, Anxiety, ADHD, Depression
Layla	Female	White	Junior	Spinal muscular atrophy type II
Marcus	Male	White	Junior	Cerebral Palsy, Anxiety, depression, OCD, epilepsy
Neil	Male	Caucasian	Junior-Senior	Autism, Anxiety, Depression, ODD
Victor	Male	White	Freshman	Asperger's, ADHD

Table 2*Simulation (SIM) Contexts*

Simulation	Number of Participants	Protocol	Description of SIM Context
Initial Simulation	15	Professor Alicia /Alan Williams	<p>Participants were recruited individually via an email sent on the electronic mailing list of students registered with the Disability Services Office</p> <p>Meetings conducted in simulation rooms at nearby medical university's simulation center</p> <p>Actors recruited from pool of simulation center's standardized patients, meaning they had knowledge of simulation process</p> <p>Four actors: two White males, one African American female, one White female</p>
Second Implementation	13	Professor Alicia/ Alan Williams (revised)	<p>Embedded as an activity in a transition program for incoming first-year students and upper-level mentors</p> <p>Faculty offices were reserved on campus; portable cameras staged in each office</p> <p>Actors were recruited via theater department alumni network and departmental electronic mailing list</p> <p>Three actors: one White male, one African American female, one White female</p>

Figure 1

Process of Designing a Simulated Meeting Protocol

