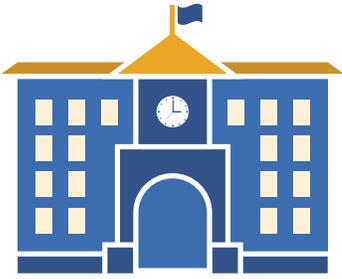


# Self-Advocacy Skills and Self-Determination: Keys to Postsecondary Success

## Key Considerations for Higher Education Faculty



**Faculty at higher education institutions have an unprecedented opportunity to shape a more inclusive society while unlocking untapped individual talent in every field and discipline.**

Advancements in civil rights have brought more bright and talented students with visible and invisible disabilities to every campus, major, and classroom. Unfortunately, these students are significantly less likely than their peers to graduate<sup>1</sup>. But students, faculty, and their institutions are beginning to change that by focusing on some of the specific challenges students with disabilities face in completing their education and fulfilling their potential. One of those challenges is inexperience with self-advocacy skills and self-determination, skills and capacities that empower students with disabilities to thrive with the increased responsibility placed on them in postsecondary education and the ownership they must take of their learning. Effective self-advocacy skills and self-determination are necessary for all students graduating from postsecondary education, but for various reasons that will be discussed, even more essential for those with disabilities.

This piece—created in collaboration with 10 general and special education national experts and higher education stakeholders—provides background on actions faculty can take to help students with disabilities develop the self-advocacy skills and self-determination they need to be successful.

### Students with disabilities who are more self-determined:

- ✓ Are better at asking for and receiving academic accommodations;
- ✓ Have higher grade point averages;
- ✓ Have stronger employment outcomes;
- ✓ Have more positive independent living outcomes; and
- ✓ Are more likely to be included in different aspects of community life.

*Source: Wehemeyer and Abery, 2013; Bethune 2015; Sarver 2000*

<sup>1</sup> <https://ies.ed.gov/ncser/pubs/20113004/pdf/20113004.pdf>



## Self-Advocacy Skills and Self-Determination: At a Glance

**Self-advocacy skills** include a person understanding themselves, their rights, and their needs, and communicating that understanding—leading to self-determination.

Examples include:

- Self-awareness
- Communication
- Navigating resources
- Forming and nurturing relationships
- Perspective taking

**Self-determination** is a dispositional characteristic that enables a person to act in service of freely chosen goals and make or cause things to happen in their own life.

Examples include:

- Self-advocacy skills
- Goal-setting
- Decision-making
- Problem solving
- Self-efficacy



## Understanding Transition Issues

When students with disabilities enroll in college, they are moving from an educational environment where parents, teachers, and others identify and address educational challenges on a student's behalf, to a setting where all of this becomes the responsibility of the student. Once enrolled in college, these challenges might continue as each course requires students to:

- make judgments about and assess the nature of class content, the format of the class, and the learning and performance expectations of the instructor;
- compare class expectations to their personal learning profile, which requires a strong understanding of their learning profile;
- use that analysis to make decisions about academic routines and compensatory strategies they will need to use in order to be successful in class;
- consider which accommodations are needed for each class and then actively request those accommodations in every class, each semester; and
- follow through with those routines and strategies, utilizing other services and supports as appropriate across different courses throughout their academic career.

For students who are entering higher education, these challenges arise at the same time they are exploring and navigating an entirely new educational environment and often living on their own for the first time. If a student enrolls in a course where there is a mismatch between the instructor’s teaching style, understanding of disabilities, willingness to serve students with disabilities, and the student’s learning strengths and needs, their challenges may be considerable. Moreover, many disabilities are “invisible” (e.g. learning and attention issues like dyslexia and ADHD), so faculty and staff may be unable to immediately identify a need for support.



Misunderstandings and myths about learning differences may result in assumptions that some student behaviors are a result of a lack of motivation or entitlement, leaving a missed opportunity to equip students to fully utilize the personal routines and campus supports needed for learning and success.

As a faculty member, you can take high-impact actions to contribute to your discipline and help your students succeed and achieve their fullest potential by understanding their needs, recognizing the importance of self-advocacy skills and self-determination, advocating for those needs within your department, and proactively supporting them to use these skills and capacities to succeed in your classroom. Both within your department and within your classroom, you can take proactive steps to dispel and counter 6 myths your colleagues or your students (including internalized myths students with disabilities have about themselves) have about individuals with disabilities.

## SIX MYTHS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND HOW TO ADDRESS THEM

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- 1 MYTH:** The presence of a disability—whether physical or “invisible,” such as learning disabilities and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (LD/ADHD)—implies that a student is not capable of excelling in college coursework.

**ACTION:** Students may need accommodations that enable them to access information or express what they are learning in different ways. They may also use different study routines to apply content-related understanding outside of the classroom. That said, they are in college because they have demonstrated potential for postsecondary success – similar to students without disabilities. Faculty members can be instrumental in supporting them to effectively advocate for their rights, needs, interests, and learning potential.
- 2 MYTH:** Students regularly use their disability as a “crutch” and have become entitled by all the supports received in the K-12 setting.

**ACTION:** Leaving an environment with a high amount of external support and structure and entering one that demands much more independence and confidence may be challenging, but that does not imply a lack of motivation to make that transition. What might look like entitlement might actually be a student learning how to navigate this adjustment period. Faculty members can encourage students to use supports available to them. Moreover, if faculty are willing to see their course from the eyes of the student, they can be instrumental in collaborating with the student to set and reach high expectations in the course.
- 3 MYTH:** Professors who are experts in the subject they teach and who receive positive reviews on their teaching style should not change their instructional methods as students need to learn to adapt and develop quality study habits to be successful.

**ACTION:** Your colleagues can recognize that what is typically taken for granted (e.g., reading a textbook) as an easy task for many students can be very tedious, time-consuming, and exhausting for some students with disabilities. Some might incorrectly perceive that a student who is looking for alternate ways to learn something is lazy or lacking motivation – when in fact the exact opposite may be true. For example, if a student looks for alternative resources to the textbook, they may be trying to find resources that support their processing needs so they can more fully understand the concepts – not to get out of the assigned readings. If a student asks for a PowerPoint file in advance, they may be planning to use it for pre-studying and in-class note taking – not to find a way to skip class. Finding and developing resources that depict, engage, and enable students to demonstrate learning in multiple ways—the essential tenets of Universal Design for Learning—can be a game-changer for some students while being helpful to all.

- 4 MYTH:** “Teaching to the middle” will at least reach the majority of students in a classroom.  
**ACTION:** You can embrace the notion that everyone does not learn the same way you do—and everyone does not learn the way you teach. That does not reflect negatively on your teaching style. To the contrary, we all have different learning profiles, needs, interests, and strengths, and we are likely to teach in the same way we learn personally. Simulations, such as [Understood.org’s Through Your Child’s Eyes](#), may help you understand how a struggling student sees the world and envision the impact of your instructional decisions on the learning of students with certain learning characteristics. You can then think about how to create classroom environments that bring out the best in students with a variety of learning profiles.
- 5 MYTH:** Designing lessons to reach the more diverse learners in a class will take a tremendous amount of time and is not possible in an already packed schedule.  
**ACTION:** When you infuse research-based teaching practices, such as principles of [Universal Design for Learning](#) (UDL), in designing courses and supporting effective instruction, you teach to all students, rather than teaching to the “average” learner – something that may save time in the long run and will enable you to keep expectations high for all students. Again, this can be a game-changer for students with disabilities while being helpful to all students. It can be surprising how small adjustments or additions to a course can make a big difference. Moreover, making these adjustments across your department can help you know that you are not unintentionally creating barriers to learning and expressions of learning that frustrate achievement of the high academic standards you seek to maintain.
- 6 MYTH:** Variety in assessment methods will make very little difference on student performance. It’s all about how hard the students work and study.  
**ACTION:** Again, faculty can consider UDL in planning for assessments and how success is measured. Supporting authentic, flexible, and multiple ways to demonstrate understanding is better for all students. It’s important to explore options for evaluating and re-designing assessment to avoid raising unintentional barriers for students with disabilities. Such options may include a campus professional development office, teaching and learning center, etc. Keep the challenge where it should be – in learning complex and high-quality content within your field. By removing barriers in assessment techniques—including both formative and summative assessments—that have nothing to do with students’ understanding of the subject matter, you can keep performance expectations high and empower students to show you what they have learned from your teaching.



## RECOGNIZING DIFFERENCE, TRANSFORMING A FIELD

Pete Denman credits much of his success to his capacity to learn from his own struggles and recreate his life. Known best for being the lead designer at Intel for famed physicist Stephen Hawking’s speech software, Denman could relate to Hawking’s circumstances more than most. Denman persistently struggled in school, despite tests showing above average IQ. What those IQ tests failed to diagnose was Denman’s dyslexia.

At the age of 20, Denman was left quadriplegic following a diving accident. The combination of his visible and invisible disabilities plus the perception that others had of his conditions caused him to struggle with depression. It wasn’t until he enrolled at Portland Community College that Denman began to hit academic strides. For the first time in his life, he came to realize that he was smart and didn’t have to settle for less than his biggest dreams. He eventually transferred to Portland State University and graduated in 1998 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Design and Visual Communications.

Denman’s success has come not despite, but because of his disabilities. He credits his dyslexia for his capacity to be more social and believes his disabilities gave him the ability to look at the world in new ways and inspired his innovative and life-changing work. He is also quick to note that his career and life have been shaped by positive and negative experiences – by individuals in college who dismissed him, as well as those who engaged and empowered him to become the self-possessed thinker and leader he is today.

Pete Denman has done more than give voice to one of the most revered minds of our time. He has given voice to a new generation of thinkers and leaders who believe that, with the right support, their identity and disability can fuel rather than inhibit their education, career, and lives. His advice for postsecondary faculty who teach students with disabilities today is, “A ramp is an obvious accommodation to give access to anyone who is in a wheelchair. But for people who learn differently, it’s not obvious that a small tool or accommodation can be that ramp that will open opportunities. These people who process differently are often our most creative thinkers because of this difference, not despite it. We need more of these kind of thinkers.”

