

Redefining U-M Accessible Attendance Policies

Alt text: an icon of a cartoon yellow lightbulb

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Letter to Faculty Considering Implementing More Accessible Attendance Policies...

Dear Faculty,

We are writing you as part of a broader initiative to advocate for more inclusive and accessible academic policies at our university, specifically concerning attendance policies and the adoption of lecture capture technologies. Due to the diverse needs of today's students, these alternations can guarantee that everyone, including those with disabilities, has equal opportunities to succeed in the classroom. Flexible policies and accessible technology are not just accommodations—they are components of an equitable classroom environment.

Our research highlights the challenges that traditional attendance policies create, which often prioritize physical presence over engagement. These policies impact not only students with disabilities but also those with intersecting identities. For example, students who lack access to healthcare or face systemic barriers to obtaining necessary documentation can be impacted. By implementing lecture capture and more flexible attendance policies, we can redefine participation to value active engagement in various forms, regardless of physical location.

We understand concerns about privacy, content misuse, and logistical complexities surrounding these efforts. However, these challenges can be mitigated effectively with clear guidelines, robust privacy protections, and dedicated faculty support. This step forward represents a powerful commitment to innovation and inclusivity, showcasing the university's leadership in creating an academic environment where all students can thrive.

Thank you for considering this transformative initiative.

What Is SSD?

Origin

- U-M recognized the Office of Disabled Student Services In February of 1974.
 - 5 months after the passage of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act
- In 1989, the office changed Its name to Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD)

Purpose

Offers a wide variety of accommodations for disabled students (includes: placement testing, paratransit services, accessible parking, housing, etc)

Management

SSD utilizes ACCOMMODATE, a core electronic case management system that assists students, faculty, and staff In requesting, approving, and Implementing disability-related accommodations.

Mission

- To ensure equal opportunity for all Individuals
- Disability Is an Integral part of diversity
- Committed to creating an Inclusive and equitable educational environment for disabled students

Funding

SSD relies partially on donors for funding

Scholarships

SSD offers scholarships for disabled students who are connected with their disability services office.

How disability's historical/contemporary intersections with race, gender, sexuality, and class inform the design and use of flexible attendance policies?

- The need for flexible attendance policies is rooted in the history of disability rights and intersectional advocacy.
- Marginalized students may not be able to access accommodations and support. Thus, flexible attendance policies are necessary.
 - Ex: If they lack health care or are economically disadvantaged, they may not be able to provide sufficient documentation
- Historically, education systems were centered around able-bodied, upper-class perspectives, disregarding the needs of students with Intersecting Identities.
- Let's create an inclusive, accessible educational environment for all.

How do our everyday encounters with computing technologies reflect cultural values about what makes a “desirable” or “ideal” student?

- Conventional attendance policies idealize students who consistently show up in-person, fully able-bodied, and are ready to participate (excluding those with disabilities).
- These ideals reinforce cultural biases favoring able-bodied Individuals.
- 100% attendance shouldn't only indicate commitment
 - from afar, students can send professors articles or post questions to canvas to participate.

Current UM attendance policies

- Attendance policies are set by university departments and professors
- “Students are expected to attend all classes. Students may be dropped from a course by the department for non-attendance.” (University of Michigan College of Literature, Sciences, and Arts)
- If a student misses a class due to an illness/event, it is their responsibility to notify the instructor and provide an explanation.
 - Often documentation from a qualified professional is required

- LSA offers a form to send to professors that explains extended absences, but this doesn't mean that the student will be accommodated or these absences will be excused.
- Discussions with professor/department heads for makeup assignments

Flexible attendance as an accommodation at U-M. How Do students get it?

1. Intake meeting

- Student has an initial meeting with an SSD Accommodations Coordinator
- Student shares thier disabilities and/or what barriers they face regarding in person class and/or attendance\

2. SSD Review

- SSD Coordinator will review what the student has shared
 - compare with what ADA qualifies as a disability
- May ask for supporting documentation from a qualified professional

3. Accommodations

- If appropriate, SSD will offer a flexible attendance policy
- Students can share the letter of accommodation to specific faculty
 - further discussion with faculty is encouraged

Flexible attendance as an accommodation at U-M. Implementation with Faculty

1. Notify Faculty

- Student shares Letter of accommodation with chosen faculty
- Students can have a discussion with faculty to make a plan in case of absence
 - Together they can fill out a form to lay out expectations

2. Issues

Examples Include...

- Faculty does not adhere to accommodations student is penalized for absences Faculty and/or student is not communicating properly
- Issues

3. Limitations

- **SSD can't fundamentally alter a course**
 - **SSd can't force faculty to offer more absences if the class is built around in person participation, but sss reviews classes to determine the importance of attendance**

Image: a lightbulb drawn on a sticky note with a red push pin in the corner

Some Professors Get it... & Some Don't

- Some professors don't monitor attendance or penalize students for missing class.
 - Some do! (Dropping letter grades)
 - Some implement a specific number of sick days
- They post notes/slides from class
 - Some refuse ("You should have come to class")
- They record sessions and include closed captioning
 - Some say they can't figure out how to, yet they haven't tried to ask for help.
 - Some say their classrooms aren't meant for it, but all classrooms should be updated to implement recording/Zoom abilities
- While class isn't meant to be virtual, they set up Zoom for sick/absent students.
 - Some will offer notes/slides, but if you can't be in class, you can't join virtually.
 - this creates stress/feelings of unease among many students

Flexible attendance policies at other universities:

- Policy suggestions from The University of Kansas, Oregon State University, and University of Missouri...
- Increasing the number of absences for students that require it
 - Ex: "An instructor allows three absences. Upon the fourth absence, students' grades drop by a letter. Solution: The instructor permits a student with an accommodation for flexible attendance six absences, and 24 hours to make up any work missed" (University of Missouri Disability Center)
- Allowing students to respond to clicker questions via email

Alt text: the title is written in a drawing of a piece of paper with a pink push pin in it. The body of the text is written in a drawing of a pink piece of notebook paper

Imagine a Future that Includes...

- Standardized recorded lectures available for students
- Classrooms with cameras and microphones that capture/transcribe the lesson plans
- Students aren't penalized for missing class
- Students aren't stressed/worried about joining a class from home
- Students can participate/answer clicker questions from home

Mitigating concerns regarding lecture capture...

Concerns

- Fear of decontextualization of content
- instructors may worry that recorded lectures could be edited, taken out of context, or shared publicly, leading to misinterpretation or misrepresentation of their teaching/privacy concerns
- Instructors fear that their lectures (especially those covering controversial topics) may be used against them
- technical/logistical concerns: professors may feel unprepared/ill-equipped to handle recordings

Mitigation

- Clear guidelines on usage (how recordings can and can't be shared)
- Use watermarking and timestamps to ensure content can be traced back to its original context
- Contracts protecting professors
- Ensure that any service used to transcribe lectures, including real-time captioning (CART), is bound by strict privacy agreements, guaranteeing that transcripts are not shared without the instructor's consent.
- Implement a policy that limits access to lecture recordings and transcripts to students enrolled in the course and those with accessibility needs, with additional layers of privacy protection for instructors.
- Faculty should be provided with training and resources on how to record, edit, and share lectures (there should be an established dedicated support team)

How Might Disability Inform, Innovate, or Transform our Ideas about Technology?

- Disability advocates call for policies that view attendance as more than just physical presence. Engagement can take multiple forms.
- Today, technology is more developed than ever, especially in a post-pandemic world.
- Flexible attendance policies should include:
 - virtual participation, extended deadlines, adaptive grading
- SSD should shift the focus from strict presence to high engagement
 - This way, all students will feel valued.

Lessons Learned From the Past and the Present

- The importance of...
 - advocacy
 - community-driven solutions
 - policy reform
 - listening to voices of those affected
- Changes come with activism/time
 - highlights the need for persistence
- Over time, as technology evolves, u-m will need to reform their policies
- inclusive policies must be responsive to change

Alt text: A group of 5 students, looking happy, collaborating/working on their assignments, around a table

“No Exceptions” Summary

Michigan Daily Article (2020)

- Discusses “no exceptions” policy for Econ 101 course and how this prevented the success of multiple disabled students while violating the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
 - Professor refused to open an exam hours early for a student who would be forced to take the exam under medical duress
 - Professor refused to accommodate a student who physically couldn’t attend class. They wouldn’t allow her to submit quizzes digitally
 - Students had proper documentation and suggested accommodations were reasonable
- The University of Michigan failed to properly respond to these grievances
 - The system that the University of Michigan has for addressing grievances does not involve anyone with knowledge of disability
 - The committee to address grievances was made up of the professor’s colleagues

Remi is dedicated to creating an inclusive,
accessible learning environment for students at
U-M....

“UM should reimagine what it means to teach and learn. It should not depend on physically being in a classroom” - Professor M. Remi Yergeau

Prof. M. Remi Yergeau Interview

How do they view accommodations?

University Policies

- No university-wide policy for flexible attendance
- Policies were more flexible during the pandemic
 - There has since been a return to pre-covid policies
- In the English department, only new instructors/GSIs have set attendance policies
 - After their first semester, there is no standardized attendance policy

Lecture Capture

- Within LSA, there is an option to have automatic Lecture Capture
- Instructors have to opt in and LSA admins “turn it on” for the whole semester
- Once instructors get the video, they can edit it and determine who to share it with
- Some instructors opt out
 - Concerns about clips being leaked or admin spying on classes

Remi’s Class

- Has flexible attendance policy with no graded attendance, only graded work
- In-class activities are designed to have alternative routes for completion

Thoughts on SSD

- Understaffed and underfunded
- Believes an “accommodation first” model rather than a “diagnosis first” model would make accommodations more accessible to students who need them
 - There are barriers to getting diagnoses

Online Classes

- There is an approval system to be able to teach classes online
- UM has an issue with campus space,
 - students are losing community/non-classroom spaces
 - Lack of handicap-accessible spaces
 - This has led to admin requiring departments to offer classes outside of peak hours, leading to scheduling challenges

Changes Wanted

- More resources available to help instructors build courses and created activities with alternative modes of completion
- Believes grading can hinder learning
 - revision model offers more opportunity for growth
- Does not believe in graded attendance

Alt text: Pink, yellow, and blue cartoon image of 2 people sitting in chairs and conversing, Empty speech bubbles surround them

SSD coordinators play a major role in making U-M a more accessible place by helping students obtain accommodations...

"I hope one day accommodations are no longer needed" - SSD staff member

SSD Coordinator Interview

How do Accommodations Work?

How Students Qualify for Accommodations

- Starts with a welcome meeting to connect students with the SSD office to discuss what disability barriers the student is facing
- SSD officers look at what the ADA says to determine if what the student is describing qualifies as a disability
- SSD officers look for supporting documentation from qualified professionals/providers

How Accommodations Work

- Qualifying students receive a modified attendance plan to go over with faculty to set expectations
- The number of absences a student can have is not set but should be within reason
- Attendance varies based on the type of class
 - For example, lecture may be more reasonable to miss than lab

How Enforceable are SSD Accommodations?

- Accommodations cannot fundamentally alter a course

- Some classes have a universal design with included absences
- SSD and faculty work together to set a policy
 - SSD explores and supports what the core aspects of the class are
- Accommodations cannot be taken away from students

Professor/Instructor Involvement

- SSD provides professors with examples of how accommodations can be applied
- Forms are provided with questions to prompt and guide discussion between faculty and students
- Communication is key. SSD helps students draft emails to faculty to discuss accommodations at the beginning of the semester to set expectations

Managing Conflicts

- If faculty doesn't accommodate students properly, SSD will review the course syllabus and escalate the student's concerns properly
- SSD may reach out to faculty if they are not following through with expectations
- SSD may escalate to speaking with faculty's department
- SSD works to bridge the gap between students and faculty by listening with an open mind

Changes Wanted

- More hybrid class opportunities
- More options and diversity of courses
- Education and encouragement of faculty and schools on campus about universal design and practices in general
- Hopes one day accommodation are not necessary

Alt text: Pink, yellow, and green cartoon image of a woman standing in between two people tugging a rope in opposite directions

What do Students Have to Say?

alt text: a yellow, pink, and green cartoon image of 3 people sitting and talking. A woman is sitting in a beanbag chair, a man is sitting in a tall chair, and another woman is sitting on the ground. There is a lightbulb above their heads.

Grace

- Accommodations make it possible for me to maintain my mental and physical health while excelling in classes. The only issue is when certain professors do not understand or respect them.
- This year, I set up a meeting with a professor to talk about my accommodations. She told me, "I can't give you special treatment. I already allow one attendance grade drop so that should be enough."
- All of my teachers record their lectures. Most of them, however, do not let me view the recording without a doctor's note because they are reserved for those who are "ill." It seems chronic illness doesn't count.

Hayley

- I have multiple different accommodations, including one for flexible attendance. In most of my classes, my accommodations do not cause any problems and help me succeed.
- There have been a few issues with my attendance policy in my spanish classes. The Romance Languages Department sets the number of excused absences allowed each semester, but it is the same for all students.
- This creates issues because students without accommodations can use their absences for any reason. On the other hand, students with a flexible attendance policy, like myself, must ration out these excused absences for their disability or barrier.

Sophia

- For the most part, my professors have done a good job honoring my accommodations.
- Having accommodations has helped me succeed in my classes

Alt text: the text is depicted in 8 different pink sticky notes

Thank You!

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