

C. Frequently Asked Questions

Question: A student claims she has an anxiety level and brings a “service dog” to class to help calm her nerves. How do I determine whether the animal is really a service animal and not just a pet?

Answer: Some, but not all, service animals wear special collars and harnesses. Some, but not all, are licensed or certified and have identification papers. Some states require individuals with service animals to carry credentials. Check with your DS office to ensure the student has submitted the appropriate documentation.

Question: Must I allow a student to act inappropriately in class if his disability is documented?

Answer: Absolutely not. All students, regardless of disability status, can and should be held to appropriate standards. And you don’t have to accept behavior that is violent or threatening.

Question: A student with a psychiatric disability is acting strangely in class. I don’t feel specifically threatened, but I’m very concerned. How should I handle the situation?

Answer: Jot down your experiences with the student and discuss them with your director of disability services. The ethical obligation to act in the student’s best interest while protecting the safety of others outweighs confidentiality because of the educational need to share this level of information.

Question: Aren’t most students with psychiatric disabilities likely to become violent at some point?

Answer: No. In fact, the opposite is true. The vast majority of students who are diagnosed with a psychiatric disability are not violent. For example, people dependent on street drugs are actually three times more likely to be violent as people with schizophrenia.

Question: What are some common mistakes administrators make when trying to address mental health issues?

Answer: The most important thing to remember when dealing with a distressed or disruptive student is to talk about specific examples of behavior (not morality, medical status or intention), how it violates written university policy and how to correct it. Comments about the student’s personality (“You’re being lazy.”); intelligence (“Are you sure you can handle college level work?”); or general outlook on life (“You’re not being realistic.”) do not help.

Question: How often can I expect to come across students with some kind of mental illness?

Answer: It’s likely you will come across students with psychiatric disabilities quite often. About 27 million adults in the U.S. have a diagnosable mental disorder, according to the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. That’s more than the combined number of people with cancer, heart disease and lung disorders. Four of the 10 leading causes of disability are mental disorders, including major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Almost half of the adults with serious and persistent mental illnesses are between the ages of 25 and 44.