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Report from the Standing Committee on Professional Development

The members of AHEAD’s Standing Committee on Professional Development spent a half-day discussing the Committee’s goals and priorities while on-site in New Orleans for the annual conference. While we’re excited about both the success of the Out of the Box! strand of conference sessions this year and our plans for additional professional development resources moving forward, we recognize that for many members a current focus is AHEAD’s recent Guidance on Documentation Practices. As a result, our post-conference conversation has centered on considering resources we might develop to support members in transition from strict documentation standards to more flexible use of external information as just one of the many sources of information that support professional decision-making.

As we’ve participated in the conversation, each of us has remarked on how difficult it is to represent something that is essentially and intentionally fluid and individual with a static process. In other words, how much our work involves professional judgment and the ability to listen, question, trust, reflect and analyze. While this observation isn’t new, I believe that AHEAD’s Guidance is most valuable in reminding us, as a profession, that our process has always involved individual consideration of the unique story each student brings into our offices.

As the Committee continues to discuss and revise materials that we hope will be useful to the membership, we’ve identified questions developed by Eastern Michigan University (EMU) as helpful in supporting individualized decision-making. Thanks to Adam Meyer, Standing Committee member and Director of EMU’s Disability Resource Center, for sharing his process and allowing us to adapt it for the ALERT.

### Disability Resource Professional’s Guide to Determining Access

**Definition of Accommodations** – Effective modifications to policies, practices, procedures and environmental barriers that offer equal access

What follows are seven steps with additional questions and insights that a disability resource professional can utilize when meeting with a student and considering reasonable accommodations to create access…with or without 3rd party documentation.

1. **Listen to the student’s story (or read if an email conversation).**
   * Based on conversation, determine…
   * Why has the student contacted the office in the first place?
   * What barriers to access have been identified?
   * What is the student requesting?
   * Questions to assist in developing the story and in learning about the barriers present:
     + What brought you here today?
     + What environments create barriers/challenges for you? What barriers/challenges in the classroom or otherwise are you experiencing currently?
     + How does X experience impact you?
     + What type of classroom environment do you prefer?
     + What solutions have worked in the past?
     + What solutions might work in this situation based on your assessment?
     + How is X class designed? How are you graded?
     + What kind of exams or assessments work well for you?
     + What is it about Y test (class, paper, etc.) that you didn’t need accommodations for it?
     + What type of assignments do you enjoy? What types of assignments challenge you?
     + What is your experience when reading (focus, comprehension, etc.)?
     + How is the housing experience going?
     + What accommodations did you use in high school?
   * When a student does not indicate a specific condition or impairment in conversation or in answer to the above questions, we may need to explore more specifically to understand that the situation is related to an underlying disability. While that exploration will likely result from questions that flow naturally from the conversation, the following may be helpful:
   * I understand the barrier /challenge you've described, but wonder if you can tell me more about why you think X situation may be a problem for you but not for other students?
   * You've described the barrier clearly but have not mentioned a disability/impairment/underlying condition. Can you tell me more about that?
2. **Initial professional observations?**
   * What makes sense based on your conversation with the student?
   * Did the student provide any external documentation that is helpful? Is it consistent with the student’s report and your observations?
   * What is not adding up for you at the moment? Start to recognize any gaps in your understanding of the situation.
   * Are there factors the student may not have mentioned that could have an impact on the situation, such as the impact of pain or medication?
   * Are there any red flags cycling through your internal filter?
   * Do your concerns have to do with determining access or are you thinking about creating a success plan for the student? Keep in mind that accommodations are about access.
3. **Any known environmental barriers, considerations, or fundamental components in play?**

* Is it immediately obvious that accommodations could create access based on the information provided?
* Is the requested accommodation clearly related to the student’s disability but inappropriate in the context (such as a request for note-card on exams that test primarily measure recall)? Accommodations that undermine academic integrity are not reasonable regardless of a clear connection to the disability.
* Consider what might warrant additional consultation with others on campus.

1. **Any gaps between what the student requests, details in the environment and what you believe would create access?**
   * Put the story, initial observations and environmental variables together.
   * Can any adjustments in the environment be made, such as seeing if the professor would modify the course to remove the barrier without accommodations?
   * Based on all information gathered, determine where reasonable accommodations can clearly create access (extended time on tests, computer for essay exams, note-takers, etc.) when environmental changes are not feasible.
   * Does the student specifically seek something that does not make sense to you based on the information gathered? This is the gap that needs to be addressed…
     + Are there other questions that you can ask to get to this information?
     + Do you need to let the student know you need to mull over?
     + Can you talk to others on campus about the situation, including getting more information from faculty, housing, etc.?
     + Would a review of the student’s academic transcript provide any beneficial information?
     + Could you experiment with certain accommodations (a modified response to intervention process) to see what impact it has on the barriers?
2. **Your judgment and assessment matter!**
   * Trust your instincts and common sense abilities.
   * Trust the student.
   * How have similar situations been handled on your campus? What (good and bad) can be learned from past experiences?
   * Do you not trust your ability to make a decision? If so, what is missing for you to have that trust?
   * Is there anything you fear about making a decision in this case?
   * Your judgment and assessment can be documented to support decisions made.
3. **Use 3rd party documentation to fill gaps in understanding**
   * Before requesting additional 3rd party documentation, ask yourself how it will assist in your decision-making.
     + Will it really be a difference-maker in the end?
     + What will it address that you cannot address within your office or in consultation with others on campus?
     + Why would you feel more confident making the decision with this additional information than without it?
   * Request documentation that specifically fills in gaps that cannot be filled otherwise…gaps must be about access only, not treatment or success plans.
     + The received information should clarify the connection between the condition and the environmental barrier for which accommodations are requested.
4. **Student or disability office consults with course and department as necessary.** 
   * What next steps does the student need to take?
   * Does the disability office need to get involved with access outcomes in some way?
   * Might the accommodation result in a fundamental alteration requiring that you consult with faculty, housing, etc. before making a decision?
   * Keep the conversations going as necessary, including as changes evolve either with the person or within the environment.