Accommodating and Modifying for Special Populations

Students enter face-to-face and online learning environments with different learning needs, including learning differences that are short or long-term. These differences impact the ways students communicate, interact with their peers, and learn new academic content. In order for students to succeed, some students need additional accommodations or modifications to thrive. Specific and individualized accommodations and modifications are described through Individual Educational Programs (IEPs), Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), or 504 Plans. Even though the terms accommodations and modifications are often used interchangeably, they are unique, and it is important to be able to distinguish them. Ensuring that students are provided identified accommodations and modifications supports equitable learning opportunities.

1. What are accommodations and modifications for special populations?
2. What experiences do I have working with special populations in online environments?
3. What are my roles and responsibilities when it comes to accommodations and modifications for special populations in online environments?

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KEY Elements

Accommodations and modifications are academic and social-emotional support strategies that lessen learning barriers. They provide students with equitable opportunities to learn and master learning outcomes. Teachers should review students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), Individualized Learning Plan (ILPs), or 504 Plans, and determine their identified learning needs and required supports. Special population students have varied requirements and needs, and to address these, teachers must make accommodations or modifications to their lessons.

Accommodations support student access to instructional content by altering the setting and situations to allow students equitable access to the curriculum. Accommodations provide the support needed to master the learning objectives, but they do not change the curriculum's content, rigor, or standards. Examples of accommodations include providing a word bank, providing sentence starters, allowing speech-to-text, allowing for more time on tests, and changing the mode of lesson delivery. Modifications provide different or alternative learning objectives for the student, which may change the curriculum including the content, rigor, or standards for the learning objective. Before making modifications, teachers should exhaust accommodation possibilities. To provide modifications beyond what is identified in students' IEPs or ILPs, teachers are required to have a case conference or an ELL sub-committee meeting of officials to approve modifying the curriculum. For this, an individual student must have the proper legal documentation, and teachers must provide clear rationale for the modification. Examples of modifications are a reduction in the number of required standards presented in the instruction or assigning a summary of a text instead of the entire text.

When working with special populations, teachers must review a variety of legal documents. For special education students, accommodations and modifications are identified in the student's Individual Educational Plan or IEP. For English language learners, accommodations and modifications are identified in the student's Individual Learning Plan or ILP. For some students with specialized needs, 504 plans are utilized to identify necessary accommodations. 504 plans establish accommodations only, so they do not change what the student is taught. All accommodations and modifications identified in IEP, ILP, or 504 plans are legally binding, and identify what teachers must do to ensure equitable learning for their special population students.

Teachers know the standards and outcomes required as well as the accommodations and modifications students need. Teachers often provide additional scaffolding, use multi-modal instructions, clearly define short-term learning goals, and utilize assistive technologies for all students. By understanding how to implement accommodations and modifications, teachers can provide the best online learning environment possible, ensuring students' success.

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