



How and When to Refer

Post-secondary institutions have a legal duty to accommodate disabilities, but they also have a “duty to inquire”. This means that post-secondary staff must attempt to help students who are unwell or are perceived to have a disability by offering assistance and accommodations. This is because some disabilities leave students unable to identify that they have a disability, or that they require an accommodation. As the Ontario Human Rights Commission stated, in their 2018 report ‘Policy on accessible education for students with disabilities’: *Where an education provider is aware, or reasonably ought to be aware, that there may be a relationship between a disability and a student’s behaviour or academic performance, the education provider has a “duty to inquire” into that possible relationship before making a decision that would affect the student adversely (p. 73).*

It can be difficult for staff to know when and how to refer a student to the disability support office for consideration for academic accommodation and support. It is important to note that when in doubt, it is best to refer.

Who should I refer to the disability services office?

- Refer any student who is (or you suspect is) experiencing some challenges as a result of an underlying disability, condition or experience and/or because of an inaccessible environment.
- Although the term disability is to be interpreted broadly, some students may not resonate with the term, though they may require accommodations. It can be difficult to know when to refer a student to the disability services office. When in doubt, refer.

When should I refer a student to the disability services office?

Pay attention to signs or cues that you should refer the student to the disability services office, such as:

- Student discloses a known disability, condition, or traumatic event (e.g., “My depression is really bad right now: I can’t get any work done.”).
- Student discloses a suspected disability, illness, or condition (e.g., “I started counselling because I have been feeling really depressed lately. I think I have depression.”).
- Student discloses symptoms (e.g., “I’ve been feeling really anxious lately and can’t focus on anything.”).
- Student requests an accommodation directly from you. (e.g., “Can I get an incomplete for this course? I had to miss a lot of assignments because of my disability.”).
- Students requests a retroactive accommodation directly from you (e.g., “I couldn’t complete the assignment due last week because I was in the hospital.”).
- You suspect a student is impacted by a disability, condition, or traumatic event. (e.g., Student’s behaviour has changed. They appear physically, emotionally, or psychologically unwell and are exhibiting behaviour that is not typical for them).

How can I refer a student to the disability services office?

- If the student disclosed their condition or the need for accommodations with you, thank them for confiding in you, it may have taken a significant amount of courage for the student to open up to you so make sure to thank them for sharing. If you suspect they require accommodation support, it may be helpful to let them know you observed that they are experiencing some challenges academically, and that you want to help them access support.
- Indicate that they are not required to share any private medical information with you, or seek accommodation directly from you.
- Ask if they need support or accommodations (ask about the need, not the disability/condition).
- Inform them that accommodation support is available for students with disabilities, medical conditions, persons impacted by trauma, etc. Clarify the specifics for domestic and international students.
- Indicate how often you work with the disability services office and let them know that you can help make that connection for them.
- Reinforce the success of students accessing academic accommodations, demonstrating that there is no concern or assumptions about their ability.

➤ Inquire into the need, not the disability itself. For example, you could ask “what kind of support would help you to complete your classwork for this class?”

➤ Keep confidentiality and avoid speaking to students in public.

➤ Do not pressure students to share more information than they are comfortable sharing.

➤ Be kind, supportive, and straightforward.



Sample script:

Thank you for confiding in me. I work with [name of disability services office] regularly to ensure students are appropriately accommodated and supported. They offer accommodations and various types of support. Even if you're unsure of whether the service is right for you, [name of disability services office] can talk you through next steps or provide additional information and resources if appropriate.

Are you comfortable with me referring you to [name of disability services office]? I can send them an email on your behalf and copy you, if needed. Or you can just register with [name of disability services office] by yourself by [indicate how].

In order to protect your privacy, only [name of disability services office] will review and store any medical documentation you have and registering with them is strictly confidential.

If you require further support as you navigate, please let me know, or [name of disability services office] directly at [email of disability services office].

How can I refer a student to the disability services office?

	Disability Services Office (DSO)	Counselling Services	Student Success/Academic Advising
Who are they?	Disability Services Office (DSO) is one of a collection of terms (including Accessibility Services Office, Accessible Learning, Disability Support Services, etc.) used to refer to the office within a college or university responsible for providing academic accommodations to students with disabilities.	Counselling Services are available to support students working through issues affecting their mental health. Services are offered by staff with professional backgrounds who are members of professional associations who are governed by the Regulated Health Care Professionals Act (RHPA).	Student Success Advisors and/or Academic Advisors collaborate with students to support them on their academic journey. They can aid in sorting issues or achieving tasks through guidance and connections with appropriate departments or services.
How does intake work?	May require disclosure of disability and/or accommodation need, with appropriate documentation.	Mental health needs typically assessed in an intake appointment. No documentation required.	Appointments can typically be made online or by walking into the office. No documentation required.
What do they do?	Work with students to understand the impacts of their disabilities, develop academic accommodation plans that consider goals and establish and monitor academic accommodations available for full participation in higher education. Also offer disability-specific training courses, workshops, student groups, specialised initiatives and learning supports, Field and Practicum supports, and facilitation of access to disability-related funding (e.g., Grants and Bursaries for Students with Disabilities etc.).	Counsellors provide short-term, and goal-focused supports. They can refer students in need of more long-term therapeutic counselling to other professionals in the community. Crisis intervention and emergency response is offered through cooperative efforts with other college or university services and/or community resources. Additional services are offered through workshops, training courses, video, or audio casts etc.	Their support may include but is not exclusive of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Academic Advising Support · Academic program and course mapping and academic pathways · Referral to wellness or learning services · Help understand institutional policies and processes · Assist with solving problems or communicate with staff or peers. Also part of early intervention initiatives to proactively support students before their challenges may become insurmountable.
Do they provide accommodations?	Yes!	May support with requests for compassionate consideration and flexibility where needs are related to personal circumstances and not one's disability, e.g. assignment extension due to experience of grief.	May support with requests (Registrar or Academic) for flexibility where needs are related to personal circumstances and not one's disability, e.g., alternative test date due to death in the family.