



National Disability Center  
for Student Success

Campus Accessibility Spotlight Series

# Strengthening Field Placement Accessibility

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## Introduction: The Institutional Challenge

This Campus Accessibility Spotlight focuses on the development of clearer guidelines for accommodations in fieldwork, clinical placements, internships, and practicums at the University of Utah.

While classroom accommodations were well established, students and faculty faced uncertainty when applying those processes to external training sites. This spotlight examines how cross-unit collaboration, student advocacy, and institutional leadership led to the creation of formalized guidance and outlines strategies other institutions can adopt. Ensuring equitable access to internships, externships, clinical placements, and practicums where academic accommodation processes do not clearly translate to non-University sites.

## **Why Focus on Fieldwork and Clinical Accommodations?**

- Increasing numbers of students with disabilities are enrolled in programs requiring clinical or field placements.
- Experiential learning is central to degree completion in programs such as social work, psychology, medicine, and STEM.
- Misunderstanding where academic accommodations apply can limit access and increase institutional risk.
- Clear guidelines protect students, faculty, departments, and placement sites.
- Aligns with university commitments to universal design, legal compliance, and institutional equity.

# The Pain Points

- **Ambiguity between academic coursework and clinical/field settings.** Students were told Center for Disability and Access (CDA) accommodations were enforceable in classroom settings but unclear in clinical placements.
- **Reactive, case-by-case processes.** No standardized pathway for requesting accommodations at external sites.
- **Student burden and disclosure anxiety.** Students had to independently decide whether and how to disclose disabilities to supervisors who held evaluative authority.
- **Inconsistent communication across departments.** Guidelines were not systematically included in handbooks or orientation materials.
- **Misinformation about eligibility.** Students and families believed accommodations were unavailable for clinical placements.
- **Limited relationship-building capacity.** High caseloads (approximately 600 students per advisor) made proactive planning difficult.
- **Accessibility barriers at sites.** Physical barriers, unmarked accessible entrances, and inaccessible meeting spaces complicated placements.
- **Lack of disability discourse.** In some programs, disability and accommodations were not discussed in five years of training.

## Meet the People

Students and leaders involved in clinical education, disability access, and institutional policy at the University of Utah were interviewed by the National Disability Center about their work to clarify and standardize fieldwork and clinical accommodations. Those interviewed were:



**Christine Anderson, EdS, CRC**

Director, Center for Disability & Access

Role: Oversees accommodation implementation in alignment with federal and university policy, bringing rehabilitation counseling and administrative expertise to complex clinical and field placement contexts.



**Erin Sullivan, JD**

Associate Director, ADA/Section 504 Coordinator

Office of Equal Opportunity & Title IX  
Role: Investigates disability discrimination complaints and ensures compliance, initiating cross-campus efforts that led to formalized fieldwork accommodation guidance.



**Angela Smith, PhD**

Associate Professor, English and Gender Studies

Director, Disability Studies

Co-Chair, Universal Design and Access Committee

Role: Facilitates cross-campus collaboration to strengthen fieldwork accommodation guidance, bridging disability studies scholarship and institutional practice.



**Michelle Gereau Mora, MS**

Doctoral Student, Clinical Psychology

Role: Advocates for clearer clinical accommodation processes, elevating student perspectives to reduce ambiguity and burden in field placements.



## By The Numbers

50%\*

Disabled occupational therapy students experienced challenges during fieldwork

25%

Fieldwork educators considered use of an ASL interpreter unreasonable

96%

Fieldwork educators considered use of adaptive equipment reasonable

**Sources:** Ozelie et al. (2019); Ozelie et al. (2022).

\*Rounded number

## Fresh Insights

Field placements are a unique way for students to apply their classroom knowledge in a practical, real-world setting. Helping students with disabilities become aware of the process for requesting accommodations in these placements is fundamental to supporting them in overcoming accessibility barriers, ensuring equal access to all educational opportunities, and successfully completing their programs.

Erin Sullivan, JD



For updated guidelines to be effectively employed, they should be brought to the attention of all students involved in clinical placements and likely the traineeship sites/supervisors themselves. As such, while clearer guidelines could most certainly lead to improvements, the lack of communication around them is a hindrance.



Michelle Gereau Mora, MS,

It is vital that students with disabilities have access to fieldwork, practicums, and other kinds of real-world training. But translating academic accommodations to these sites can be challenging. I am so appreciative of the Office for Equal Opportunity, which has developed these helpful guidelines, and of the Center for Disability and Access, whose staff are helping students navigate this process to achieve genuine access in their studies.



Angela Smith, PhD

## Unexpected Revelations



Students in some programs had never heard disability and clinical accommodations discussed.



The absence of communication about guidelines can undermine otherwise strong policy improvements.



Students often assumed accommodations were unavailable in field placements, even when policy permitted them.

## What a Student Says



What prompted me to bring this up was the uncertainty and frustration that I experienced personally and that I heard reflected from a couple of disabled colleagues and friends within the clinical psychology program. I would like to improve these issues not just for the current students but for those who come after me.

This matter is important to disabled students (myself included) and should be important because the lack of clear clinical accommodation guidelines and their poor/incomplete communication to all involved parties is a form of institutional ableist discrimination which 1) breeds overall confusion and misunderstanding; 2) puts students at risk of experiencing unequal opportunity, prejudice, and marginalization by their program and traineeship sites; and 3) places the burden/onus on disabled students to find relevant information and educate their programs and supervisors on appropriate procedures.

**Michelle Gereau Mora, MS, Doctoral Student**

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Although we are required to sign up for credits for any formal clinical/traineeship placement, it seems that we are subject to the rules and regulations of the traineeship site with regards to any accommodation needs. However, because we are also not formally hired at traineeship sites, there is really no official or standardized process available to us for accommodation requests and enforcement at those sites.

As a result, student trainees have to decide whether and how to bring up accommodation needs to their direct clinical supervisor at the site, and only the supervisor can decide to what extent they are willing to make accommodations to meet the student's needs. Student trainees are thus nervous about how to broach the conversation with new supervisors who 1) may or may not be receptive or understanding of the student's circumstances; 2) are not subject to standardized procedures to be followed; and 3) hold all the authority in making accommodation decisions.

**Michelle Gereau Mora, MS, Doctoral Student**

# Strategies for Success on Your Campus

## 1. Conduct a Policy Gap Audit

Compare classroom accommodation procedures with field placement processes to identify inconsistencies.

## 2. Develop Clear Fieldwork Guidance and Repository

Create written guidelines for internships, externships, clinical sites, and practicums. Share examples to normalize implementation and reduce uncertainty.

## 3. Engage Legal Counsel Early

Ensure alignment with ADA and Section 504 requirements before implementation.

## 4. Form a Cross-Campus Working Group

Include disabled students, faculty, disability services, and legal partners.

## 5. Embed Guidance in Program Materials

Integrate language into handbooks, syllabi, and placement agreements.

## 6. Standardize Accommodation Language

Create consistent wording for clinical and field placement contexts.

## 7. Train Faculty and Site Coordinators

Clarify the interactive process for external placements.

## 8. Build College-Level Liaisons

Decentralize expertise to strengthen departmental capacity.

## 9. Communicate Before Placements Begin

Proactively inform students about accommodation processes.

# Continuing the Work



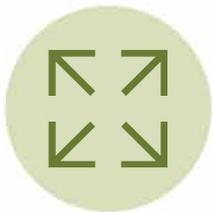
## Strengthen Visibility

- Expand outreach to colleges and advisors to ensure guideline visibility.
- Continue disability-centered dialogue within graduate programs.



## Build Infrastructure and Tools

- Develop a centralized repository of fieldwork accommodation examples.
- Explore database improvements to track practicum-related accommodations.



## Expand Departmental Capacity

- Increase faculty liaison network within departments.



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