



(<https://www.insidehighered.com>)



## Advice for hiring faculty members with disabilities (essay)

Submitted by Anonymous on October 31, 2016 - 3:00am

When one of us -- Stephanie -- was on the job market for the first time more than 10 years ago, she agonized over whether and how to mention her disability (she is deaf) in her job materials. She knew from past experience that by not saying anything, she ran the risk of creating potential misunderstandings during interviews.

When she managed to secure more than a dozen interviews at the Modern Language Association conference, where English departments perform much of the preliminary interviewing for hires, she set to work. In addition to helping arrange for interpreters in a city where she and most of the hiring departments meeting with her had few contacts, she opened every interview by taking time to explain who the interpreter was and how committee members should interact. In addition, before MLA, she spent time ensuring that every single department had contacted the interpreter, arranged payment and logistics, and so on.

While all that work might sound almost impossible to candidates who don't have to jump through such hoops, the fact is that, for many disabled scholars, the sorts of choices they face around disclosure and negotiating job market accommodations are deeply complex, fraught and, above all, risky. And for none of them is the process easy, uniform or predictable.

Stories like Stephanie's -- and dilemmas around disclosing a disability or requesting accommodations while on the job market -- are endemic. Almost every academic we know with a disability has a story about accommodations gone wrong, an inaccessible interview situation or a thoughtless ableist comment.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Many organizations such as the Modern Language Association and the National Council of Teachers of English have [general guidelines](#) <sup>[1]</sup> [about disability and the job market](#) <sup>[2]</sup>. The MLA's guidelines, for instance, ask departments to make sure that interviews are held in accessible locations and to take steps to create a welcoming environment during the interview. We offer a few additional suggestions to help search committees and hiring units to avoid disability discrimination in the hiring process.

### The Job Ad and Interview Invitation

The ad and interview are the first steps and, as a search committee or hiring unit, you should:

- Examine the boilerplate text. Recently, the boilerplate text included in job ads has been

changing in sometimes subtly yet often overtly ableist ways to add physical and sensory requirements that rarely have anything to do with the job itself. If you are writing a job ad, read [David Perry's work on this discriminatory language](#) [3].

- Clearly identify whom applicants should contact to request accommodations. You should also ensure that there is a confidential process by which those accommodations can be negotiated. Search chairs and committees need to inform candidates of this process in advance in the interview letter, and the contact person for negotiating accommodations should not be the chair of the search committee or a faculty member in the department. Instead, a clear channel should be identified through which a candidate can request accommodations that may be needed. A useful model here is the way disability services offices inform faculty of accommodations that need to be made in their classroom without disclosing a student's disability. The system in place should not require a candidate to open a conversation with a search committee member or department chair that reveals personal health information or specifics about their disability.

### **The Responsibilities of the Hiring Committee**

The hiring committee or unit should be well-versed in issues surrounding interviewing and hiring candidates with disabilities. You should:

- Discuss how to preclude any disability discrimination in determining finalists for positions. That might mean, among other things, anticipating how candidates might move, react or perform differently at different stages of the interview process. You should also consider the significance accorded to certain kinds of performance. For example, a person who learns names quickly may make a good first impression, but that hardly is a prerequisite for success in academic work. [These and other tacit social tests](#) [4] should not be part of the hiring discussion.
- Consider how different interview processes might disadvantage certain candidates. Committees should work to minimize any disadvantages interviewees who have different communication, social and interpersonal styles might experience. In such discussions, the focus should be on how hiring units, search committees and job candidates might generally make the hiring process not just more accessible but also more effective. For example, if first-stage interviews have only been conducted via Skype or by telephone as accommodations, committees might consider offering all interviewees in the pool a choice as to their preferred modality. That move avoids signaling one choice as the "typical" interview setting and the other as a "[special accommodation](#)" [5].
- Educate yourselves on how disability disclosure may be (illegally) compelled in conversation. Don't ask after health conditions or comment on people's bodies. Don't assume either that anybody whose physical appearance does not reveal a disability is able-bodied. When possible, give candidates options and information that may make it possible for them to address issues that arise. (For example, candidates with dietary needs may be able to determine if a restaurant's menu will suit their needs.) Engage in conversations with applicants that make clear when there is flexibility should they have any accommodation requests.
- Be aware of common forms of disability microaggressions. People often act amazed by what a disabled person can do, assume that a disabled person needs help doing other things, ask overly personal questions, compare the candidate's disability to other forms of disability perceived to be "good" or "bad" and so on. In the context of a job interview, such comments and questions can be especially harmful and difficult to handle.

## Setting Up the Interview

It's important that disabled candidates -- in fact, all candidates -- receive as much information as possible about the interview location and situation. To that end, you should:

- Communicate as much information as possible about interview settings and procedures. That information might include how the interview will proceed and in what formats. Offer detailed information about buildings and locations where meetings may happen. Are all the buildings wheelchair accessible? Are there accessible restrooms in the building? Will interviewees be asked to move across large campus spaces to get from one meeting to another? When disabled academics don't have full information about the spaces in which they may be giving a job talk, teaching a class or conducting a meeting, they may not know whether accommodations are, in fact, needed, or how to effectively craft or adapt their delivery and presentation.
- Offer applicants choices. Where possible, we encourage committees to offer interviewees some choices. What technologies and resources will they have available or need to use for their job talk or teaching demonstration? What kind of food will be offered? When might they have opportunities for physical and mental breaks? Will there be an office available to them or a room where they will have privacy? Can they choose when something like a public talk will take place in the day? Can they choose where to sit if they are being interviewed or met by an entire department? These may seem like insignificant choices, but they could allow candidates to meet medical and other needs throughout the process.

Finally, we want to emphasize that the culture of academe itself contributes to disability discrimination. The current neoliberal climate for higher education puts pressure on all academics to be ever more flexible and adaptable. In such an environment, many highly qualified academics may fear that requesting any kind of accommodation might be interpreted as inability to perform, leading them to take their chances without the accommodations that have enabled their success. To ensure that faculty members can request and receive the accommodations they need, committees should openly indicate that access and accommodation are on their radar and proactively signal awareness of disability as important to diversity.

We hope our suggestions will encourage departmentwide and institutional conversations that can build awareness and promote accessible practices while avoiding disability discrimination. Our recommendations can be read, applied, circulated and expanded upon in a very practical way as we head into hiring season. Is your department hiring? Send this article to the search chair and start the conversation now.

### Section:

[Diversity](#) <sup>[6]</sup>

### Author Bio:

*Jay Dolmage is associate professor of English at the University of Waterloo, and Stephanie L. Kerschbaum is associate professor of English at the University of Delaware. They are both committed to addressing forms of institutional ableism and challenging disability discrimination through their research and scholarly activism.*

**Source URL:** <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/10/31/advice-hiring-faculty-members-disabilities-essay?width=775&height=500&iframe=true>

### Links:

- [1] <https://www.mla.org/Resources/Career/Career-Resources/The-Job-Search-Information-for-Job-Seekers-and-Hiring-Departments/Disability-and-Hiring-Guidelines-for-Departmental-Search-Committees>
- [2] <http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/faculty-hiring>
- [3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2016/02/08/academic-alleges-discriminatory-hiring-practices>
- [4] [https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2011/02/07/margaret\\_price\\_on\\_the\\_search\\_process\\_for\\_those\\_with\\_mental\\_disabilities](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2011/02/07/margaret_price_on_the_search_process_for_those_with_mental_disabilities)
- [5] [https://www.academia.edu/10876373/Reaching\\_the\\_Profession\\_The\\_Locations\\_of\\_the\\_Rhetoric\\_and\\_Composition\\_Job\\_Market](https://www.academia.edu/10876373/Reaching_the_Profession_The_Locations_of_the_Rhetoric_and_Composition_Job_Market)
- [6] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/diversity>

undefined  
undefined