

ACCESSIBILITY FOR GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS: A GUIDE TO OBTAINING ACCOMMODATIONS

*Document Prepared by the Inclusion and Diversity Committee,
Department of Psychology, University of Rhode Island*

Introduction

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal civil rights law that guarantees people with disabilities the same opportunities as everyone else, and this includes protections in the workplace. According to the ADA, a person with a disability (and therefore protected under the law) is someone who falls into any of these categories: i) has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, ii) has a history or record of such an impairment (such as cancer that is in remission), or iii) is perceived by others as having such an impairment (such as a person who has scars from a severe burn). As a graduate teaching assistant, you are an employee of the University of Rhode Island (URI). In accordance with the ADA, teaching assistants with disabilities are eligible for “reasonable accommodations” from the university (i.e., your employer). Reasonable accommodations refer to “an adaptation of the workplace, the equipment, or the job itself which enables an employee with disabilities to do a particular job for which she or he is qualified in training and abilities.”

Obtaining Accommodations as a URI Employee: Overview

The URI Office of Human Resources sets forth the policies and procedures related to employees requesting reasonable accommodations (see URI ADA Policy link below). Requests for accommodations can be made at any time. Such accommodations may include, for example, making facilities accessible, adjusting work schedules and assignments, and/or providing assistive devices or equipment. An employee may voluntarily disclose their disability status by providing documentation/certification of need. Medical documentation must be provided in English or it must have been formally/officially translated. The employee is not able to translate documents. The university does not have resources available to officially translate medical documentation that is not in English. Of note, graduate student teaching assistants should have access to healthcare providers at URI Health Services, who can be a potential resource to document any qualifying conditions or circumstances. Medical information provided in this process is considered confidential and will only be shared on a “need-to-know” basis. Only medical information needed to document an individual’s disability status and to document the need for accommodation may be requested and retained, in a confidential file separate from an individual’s personnel or application record. A supervisor will only be informed of functional job limits for the purpose of determining or implementing an accommodation. A request for reasonable accommodation may be rejected under certain circumstances (see full URI ADA Policy for details) but employees maintain the right to file an appeal with the ADA Section 504 Coordinator in the Office of Equal Opportunity following the University of Rhode Island Policy on Nondiscrimination (see linked nondiscrimination policy below).

Once a formal request has been submitted (using the form as described below), the decision process can move quickly (days to a couple weeks). The process may be prolonged if the employee does not provide the necessary permission/release forms allowing their healthcare provider to speak with URI Human Resources. If students have any questions about the process, they can feel free to set up an appointment with Laura Kenerson to discuss (telephone: 401-874-5271; email: lkenerson@uri.edu).

If an employee has a health condition that is well-controlled or otherwise does not require accommodations and there is a change/recurrence in that condition that might impact job performance, the departmental policy for employee illness would apply (i.e., policy around finding replacements or rescheduling work responsibilities while the employee recovers or their health stabilizes). If employees wish to have a stable health condition documented, they can apply per the process outlined in this document – this would ensure, for example, that their supervisor would be made aware of their circumstance in the event that something should come up.

Obtaining Accommodations as a URI Employee: Reasonable Accommodation Request Form

Employees seeking an accommodation must submit a Reasonable Accommodation Request form and provide appropriate documentation certifying their disability status to initiate a request for workplace accommodation. The form asks for information about your specific condition/circumstance, a specific description of the requested adjustments/accommodations to your job duties, as well as your recommendations for what you believe would represent a reasonable accommodation (or accommodations). If needed, someone else may complete the form on your behalf, or you may contact the ADA Section 503 Coordinator for assistance (telephone: 401-874-5271; email: lkenerson@uri.edu). The form is found here: <https://web.uri.edu/hr/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/URI-Reasonable-Accommodation-Request-Form.pdf>

Whether or not a graduate student has accommodations approved through the Disability, Access, and Inclusion (DAI) office to support them as a *student* does not have an association with approval of accommodations through Human Resources (as per the process described in this document) to support them as an *employee*. The DAI process to provide accommodations as a student is a completely separate process and determination than the process to provide accommodations as an employee.

If approved accommodations are not being honored/provided, the employee should let Laura Kenerson know immediately (telephone: 401-874-5271; email: lkenerson@uri.edu).

Psychology Department Faculty Point-of-Contact

If graduate students have questions or concerns about applying for accommodations to support their role as an employee of the university, they are encouraged to contact Nathan Cook, Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology (telephone: 401-874-2665; email: nathan.cook@uri.edu).

References and Resources

URI ADA Policy: <https://web.uri.edu/hr/personnel-policies/3-30-reasonable-accommodation-for-employees/#:~:text=Applicants%20seeking%20a%20reasonable%20accommodation,initiate%20a%20request%20for%20accommodation>

URI Policy and Procedure on Nondiscrimination: <https://web.uri.edu/policies/wp-content/uploads/sites/928/Non-Discrimination-Policy-20210924a-01.002.2-5yr.pdf>

Introduction to the Americans with Disabilities Act: <https://www.ada.gov/topics/intro-to-ada/>

Guide to Disability Rights Laws: <https://www.ada.gov/resources/disability-rights-guide/>