Disclosure Issues for Students with Disabilities

First, remember that you do not need to disclose unless you know you will need to request an accommodation. If you do require an accommodation, you should contact Disability Services at the particular university as early as possible to determine what documentation they will need you to provide. Universities typically have admission policies that prevent them from considering your disability in the acceptance process, but if you are concerned that knowledge of your disability will adversely affect your acceptance or potentially influence the process, you may decide to postpone your disclosure until after you have been fully accepted into the graduate program. Another possibility is to disclose to Disability Services, but request that they do not reveal your disability to faculty until after your acceptance.

There may be occasions where discussing your disability makes sense during the admission process. You may choose to mention your disability in your essay because it exhibits something important about you. (For example, how you overcame your dyslexia to earn a 4.0 average in your English major, or how you completed a marathon with only one leg.) These can be very powerful demonstrations of your academic strength and character.

If your disability is a visible one, your disclosure will take place the first time you visit campus. This may very well be before you have officially been accepted. If you will be meeting with faculty or other staff members, you may choose to disclose to them on the phone when arranging the meeting. This will help reduce the “shock” they may experience when they first see you so they can better concentrate on your abilities rather than your disability. You may also need to verify accessibility to ensure you can physically get to the meeting.

If you have a hidden disability, you may choose to keep it that way. You may be wondering how to keep your disability secret from your classmates while you are receiving accommodations. This is often an issue at the graduate level – especially in such competitive programs as medical or law school. Your fellow students may not understand your need for accommodations and believe you are getting preferential treatment. You can decide to explain your disability to them, or do your best to hide it (which may prove difficult and lead to mistrust).

Also remember that if you receive accommodations on the graduate or professional school admission test, your score report will note that the test was taken under “nonstandard” conditions. You should be prepared to discuss the reason for this with the school if they ask.

Many students who receive accommodations in college try to get through graduate school without them. This could be a grave mistake. Remember, accommodations do not make the educational program any easier – they serve to level the playing field. In your effort to hide your disability, you may end up hurting yourself.

So when should you disclose? That’s up to you. Feel free to talk to Muhlenberg staff in the Office of Disability Services, Academic Resource Center, Career Center or your faculty, if you want to explore your options.