

February 2026

Beyond Accommodations: Strategies and Supports for Students with Disabilities

Beth Pollock, Ph.D., C.Psych.

Regional Assessment Resource Centre



Regional Assessment Resource Centre:

Lunch and Learn Series

Winter 2026

Free to join. No registration required.



**From Giftedness to Intellectual Disability:
Supporting Students Across the Cognitive Spectrum**

Thursday, January 29th | 12pm to 1pm

Dr. Beth Pollock

**Beyond Accommodations: Strategies and Supports
for Students with Disabilities**

Thursday, February 26th | 12pm to 1pm

Dr. Beth Pollock

Tricky Accommodation Issues

Thursday, March 26th | 12pm to 1pm

Dr. Beth Pollock

Regional Assessment Resource Centre

RARC is a Centre of Excellence housing clinical psychologists, educators, transition specialists and researchers.

Services provided under 4 pillars:



Transition



Research



Training



Assessment

Learning Objectives:

- **Determining functional impairments**
- **Differentiate between functional impairments that are static** and best addressed through accommodations, **and those that are potentially changeable** through interventions.
- Understand the **benefits of skill-building** over accommodation for long-term success
- Appreciate **approaches to building skills**
- **Apply skills learned** to a case example

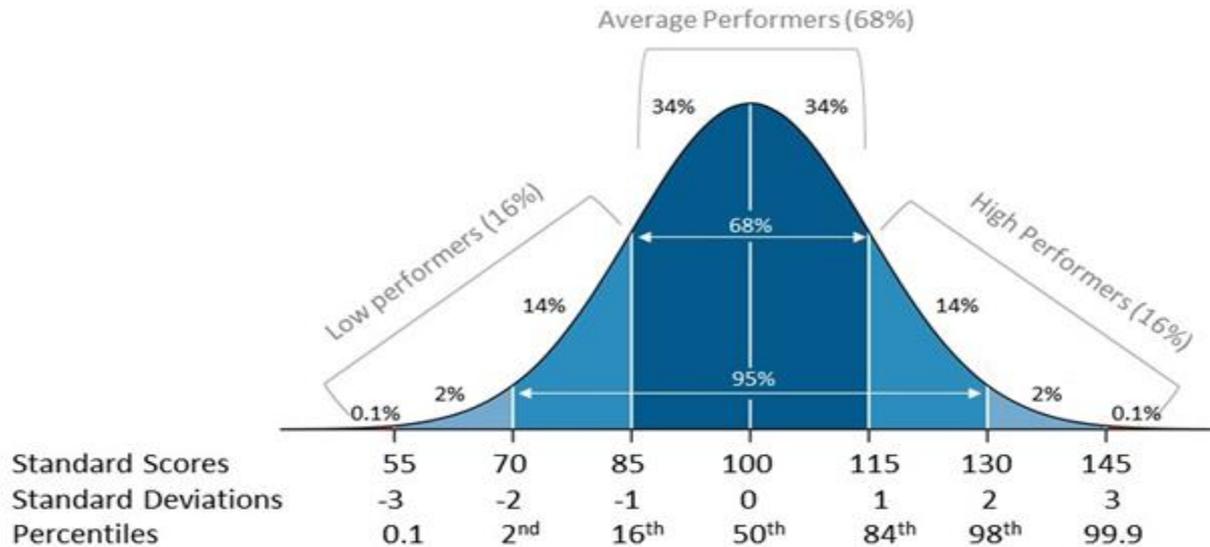


What is functional impairment?

- The formulation of disability (or “functional impairment”) is currently not operationalized in either the ICD or the DSM.
- According to OSAP, a disability means any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment—or a functional limitation—that **restricts your ability to perform the daily activities necessary to pursue studies at a postsecondary school level** or to participate in the labour force.
- The Ontario Human Rights Code focuses on the need to accommodate on the basis of functional impairments (**disturbances in performance as a result of a disability**), whether these are permanent or temporary.



Determining Functional Impairment



Capturing Functional Impairment

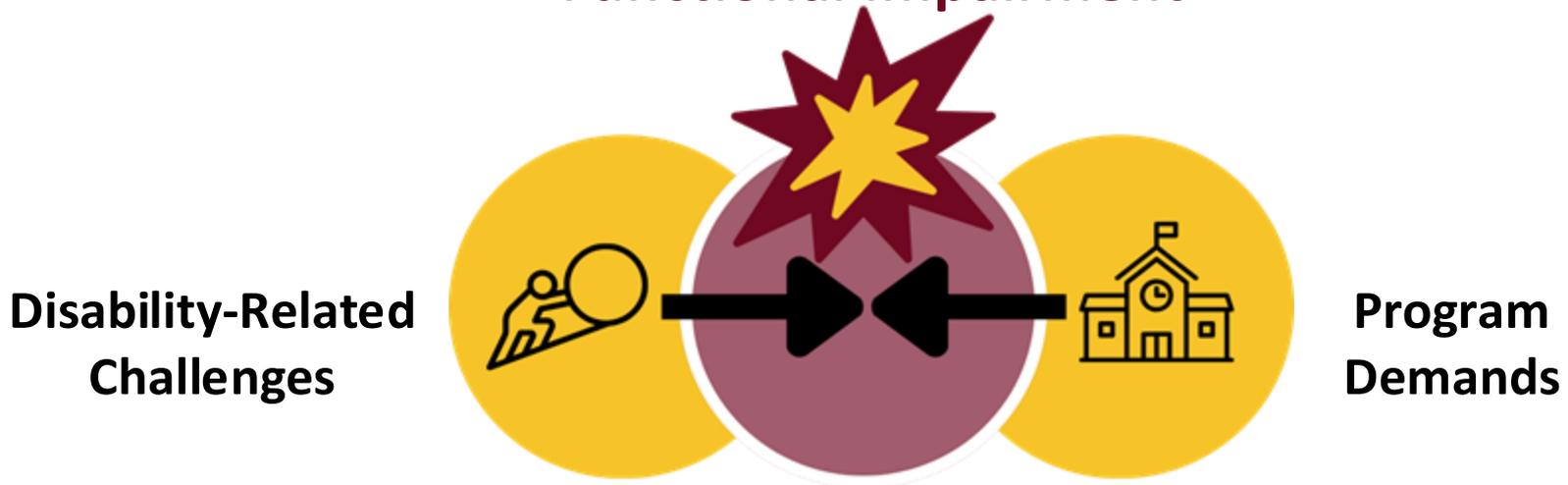
- Psychoeducational Assessment
- Disability Verification Form (OSAP)
- Medical Verification Form
- Institution Specific Forms (examples from the web)
 - [WLU](#)
 - [Ottawa U](#)
 - [St. Lawrence College](#)
 - [U of Toronto](#)
 - [U of Windsor](#)



Determining the Impairment

- Where disability related challenges and environmental or program demands collide is where barriers (functional impairments) form.

Functional Impairment



We need to consider....

The Student



Their Environment



Functional Impairments in PSE

- Functional impairments focus on how a student's disability manifests in their specific learning environment.
- For our purposes, we will define functional impairments as:
 - “Academic barriers resulting from a disability”
- Further, not all areas of challenge will cause impairment. A barrier/impairment is present when the disability-related challenges that the student experiences collide with the demands of the program.
 - Example, student with SLD in math who has enrolled in an English or Social Services Worker program.



Capturing Functional Impairment: Student's Perspective

- I can see from your transcript that you perform well in some classes and have struggled more in others. What is the difference between classes you tend to perform better in and those that you struggle in?
- What is the biggest challenge you face in your day-to-day ability to meet academic expectations? How do you overcome this issue?
- How do your (insert deficit here) challenges affect your ability to complete day-to-day academic activities? Have you found anything that helps?



Structured Evidence-Based Approach

Accessibility Advisor Worksheet

Student Name: _____

Student ID: _____

Date of Meeting: _____

Advisor Name: _____

Diagnosis & Relevant Accessibility Information

- **Diagnosis:**
 -
- **Additional Notes on Diagnosis:**
 (Include any details that provide context to the student's disability. For example, severity, frequency, or any situational triggers.)

<p>Identified Disability-Related Challenges (Describe the challenges that the student experiences in relation to their disability, based on documentation and discussion with the student.)</p>	<p>Disability-Related Functional Impairments Anticipated in the Context of their Program (Identify the primary functional impairments that are anticipated to significantly impact the student's ability to access the curriculum. This should include academic, environmental, and social aspects of their program.)</p>	<p>Linking Functional Impairments to Supports & Accommodations (Link the student's identified functional impairments to potential accommodations, learning strategist support, or other relevant institutional/community resources.) Useful tool: https://queensu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_do3AfDFH8pUpwMe</p>		
	<p>Program:</p>	<p>Accommodations</p>	<p>Learning Strategies</p>	<p>Other Supports</p>



Static versus Dynamic (Changeable) Impairments



Skill Development

- Skills are malleable/changeable
- Learn and practice practical strategies to overcome barriers due to **skill deficits** that can be improved



Accommodation/ Compensation

- Skill deficits are permanent/Not expected to improve within their study period
- Tools that help bypass barrier caused by a **disability-related challenge**

Static versus Dynamic Deficit?

- Poor time management skills
- Challenges with word decoding/word identification
- Text anxiety
- Issues comprehending what is read
- Weak spelling skills
- Challenges completing tests within the time allotted
- Poor math fact knowledge
- Issues organizing/structuring ideas appropriately in writing
- Difficulty maintaining academic motivation



Accommodations versus Interventions

- **Accommodations:** Adjustments to level the playing field. (e.g., extended time)
- **Supports/Skill Development:** Strategies that improve functioning (e.g., time-management training).
- **Research**
 - Accommodations improve initial access but **do not reliably improve learning outcomes** unless paired with strategy instruction (Sideridis et al., 2014).
 - **Instruction in executive functioning and self-regulation predicts better long-term academic success** than accommodations alone (Best et al., 2011).



Accommodations versus Interventions

- **Neuropsychological Perspective**
 - Brain systems supporting attention, working memory, and executive control are **trainable**.
 - Over-accommodation may reduce opportunities for cognitive growth and self-efficacy.
- **Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan)**
 - Competence, autonomy, and relatedness fuel motivation.
 - Post-secondary success correlates with students' capacity to **self-advocate**, **self-monitor**, and **self-regulate**.



Risks of Over-Accommodating

- **Academic Risks**

- **Masking skill deficits** instead of remediating them.
- Reduced opportunities for **strategy use**, leading to dependence.
- For example, extended time without concurrent strategy instruction has minimal effects on achievement outcomes (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014).

- **Psychological Risks**

- Learned helplessness: Students may come to see accommodations as something they “**need**” **permanently** rather than tools to use strategically.
- Lower self-efficacy: Without building skills, students report less confidence in their abilities.



Risks of Over-Accommodating

- **Functional Risks**

- Poor preparation for employment: Jobs rarely offer the same breadth of accommodations as schools.
- Transition to independent living demands self-management that accommodations alone cannot provide.

- **Other Risks?**



Identifying Challenges

Ask targeted, open-ended questions:

- “What’s been going well for you this term?”
 - “What’s been most difficult or stressful?”
 - “What has been the biggest challenge currently?”
 - “What’s preventing you from doing xyz more?”
-
- Listen for academic, personal, or environmental barriers and note them (i.e. not sleeping, going through a breakup etc.)
 - Reflect back patterns or recurring themes expressed by the student

Help Prioritize

- With the student, narrow down to no more than the top three challenges impacting them that can be addressed

Ask:

- “If you could only work on one thing right now, what would it be?”
- “What’s draining your energy the most?”
- “Which challenge is blocking other things?”

Encourage a Top 3 Focus: not everything all at once.



Addressing Malleable Skills

“I don’t know how to start writing assignments”

- Use **mind-mapping** to “rapid fire brainstorm” ideas that can be moved and organized later
- Use **speech-to-text** to “brain dump” what you know or want to say on the page. It may not be perfect, but it doesn’t have to be...it’ll give you a place to start.

Using these strategies reduces blank-page anxiety by letting students talk out ideas or visually map thoughts

"I struggle to stay on top of my assignments"

- Use **digital calendars** that allow you to view tasks in short term (daily/weekly) and long term (monthly/term), such as MyStudyLife.com
- Use **task management tools** like Notion or Microsoft To Do to break assignments into smaller, manageable steps with due dates and reminders.
- May benefit from using **assignment planners** (<https://utsc.library.utoronto.ca/assignment-planner>)
- May require **regular check-ins** to ensure they consistently use the strategies discussed or strategies can be adapted if needed.

"I get overwhelmed with research"

- Use the “**collect highlights**” feature in Read & Write to compile researched information into a google doc (and automatically have website link saved for easy referencing later)

"I struggle to keep my notes organized"

- Use **digital binders** or **file managers** like OneNote, Notability, or Google Docs for your notes and learning materials
- Use **smart pens** like Livescribe to help sync written notes with lecture audio recordings

"I can't focus when I'm reading"

- Use **text-to-speech** or audiobooks so you can listen to information (and highlight or take notes at the same time)
- Use **screen mask** in Read and Write or Immersive Reader to maintain your place and focus while reading

"I can't keep up during lectures"

- Use **speech-to-text** functions or **recording programs** that allow you to capture what's said during lectures to allow you to listen in class, and review notes later

AT and LS “CHEAT SHEETS”



AT Guide: Assistive Technology by Functional Impairments

Strategy Guide: Learning Strategies by Functional Impairment

Reading and Comprehension

Functional Impairment	AT Recommendation
Difficulty decoding or processing text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text-to-speech readers: Microsoft Word, Read&Write • C-Pen
Difficulty reading with flow and speed, silently or out loud	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immersive reader: feature in Microsoft Word
Struggles with understanding what they read	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-Dictionaries: Google, Read&Write, Dictionary.com • Auto/AI Summarizers: SMMRY, Grammarly

Reading and Comprehension:

Functional Impairment	LS Recommendation
Struggles with attention and organizing information logically	SQ3R Method (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review): A structured reading approach to improve comprehension.
Struggles with organizing and synthesizing information	Graphic Organizers: Using visual tools like concept maps, Venn diagrams, or flowcharts to organize ideas.
Struggles with active reading	Annotating Texts: Highlighting key points, making margin notes, or summarizing information
Struggles with language processing	Visual Media Resources: Reinforce concept presented in readings and lectures.

Writing and Note-Taking

Functional Impairment	AT Recommendation
Struggle with word structure/spelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech-to-text: Google Docs, Microsoft Word, Read&Write • Word Prediction: Read&Write, device built-in functionality
Struggle with sentence composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grammar editors: Grammarly, Microsoft Editor



Help the Student Set SMART Goals

Work with the student to set a few AT/LS goals that are:

- **S**pecific – “Improve time management” → “Use a weekly planner”
- **M**easurable – “Review notes twice a week”
- **A**chievable – Can they realistically do this this week?
- **R**elevant – Does the goal matter to them?
- **T**ime-bound – Add a check-in date

Example. I will download and use Read & Write’s “collect highlight” feature to complete research for my upcoming lab report by the end of this week.

Encouraging Accountability

- Schedule a follow-up meeting or email check-in
- Reinforce that setbacks are part of the process
- Recognize effort and progress, not just outcomes
- Involve or refer to other supports (AT or LS, Accessibility Services, tutors, mental health, instructors) when appropriate

Case Study

Name: Jordan M.

Age: 19

Program: First-year Bachelor of Commerce student at university

Diagnosis: Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Combined Presentation (diagnosed at age 10)

Background: Jordan received formal classroom accommodations in high school (extended time, extensions, teacher-led attentional prompts, strategic/quiet seating, and notes provided) and also had strong parental support and structured routines at home. He graduated with above-average grades.



Case Study

Presenting Concerns

- By midterm of his first semester, Jordan is experiencing:
 - Missed assignment deadlines
 - Incomplete readings
 - Difficulty starting long-term projects
 - Frequent lateness to lectures
 - Emotional overwhelm before exams
 - Increased self-doubt and negative self-talk
 - Despite understanding course material when engaged, his grades are significantly lower than expected.



Case Study

Accessibility Advisor Worksheet

Student Name: _____

Student ID: _____

Date of Meeting: _____

Advisor Name: _____

Diagnosis & Relevant Accessibility Information

- **Diagnosis:**
 -
- **Additional Notes on Diagnosis:**
 (Include any details that provide context to the student's disability. For example, severity, frequency, or any situational triggers.)

<p>Identified Disability-Related Challenges (Describe the challenges that the student experiences in relation to their disability, based on documentation and discussion with the student.)</p>	<p>Disability-Related Functional Impairments Anticipated in the Context of their Program (Identify the primary functional impairments that are anticipated to significantly impact the student's ability to access the curriculum. This should include academic, environmental, and social aspects of their program.)</p>	<p>Linking Functional Impairments to Supports & Accommodations (Link the student's identified functional impairments to potential accommodations, learning strategist support, or other relevant institutional/community resources.) Useful tool: https://queensu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_do3AfDFH8pUpwMe</p>		
	<p>Program:</p>	<p>Accommodations</p>	<p>Learning Strategies</p>	<p>Other Supports</p>



RARC WORKSHOP

 Donald Gordon Centre, Queen's University

Thursday May 21, 2026

9:00am-4:30pm + social
hour and dinner

Friday May 22, 2026

8:30am-12:00pm

From Tribunal to Campus: What Recent HRTO Decisions Mean for Accessibility Advisors

Lawyer Sari Springer will be presenting on post-secondary accessibility practices within the context of current legislation and Ontario Human Rights Tribunal decisions. This year's workshop will be best suited for those in decision-making positions within their Accessibility Services departments.

Give your input on Workshop
Questions and Lunch and
Learn Topics!



Thank You!

Regional Assessment and Resource Center (RARC):

www.queensu.ca/rarc

Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario

Beth Pollock, Clinical Director beth.pollock@queensu.ca

Connect with RARC:



rarc@queensu.ca



www.queensu.ca/rarc



613-533-6311



Mackintosh-Corry Hall, B100
68 University Avenue
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
K7L 3N6

