A Question of Confidentiality

By Dr. Stephanie Lee

As you know, counselors cannot reveal confidential information about students, especially when you consider the types of personal information shared between student and counselor in the DSP&S department. But, what about protecting a student’s privacy in the classroom? We thought it might be helpful to share some suggestions on ways to protect the privacy of students in classes here at Citrus.

1. Many students are reluctant to use DSP&S services because they are fearful that they will be identified in front of classmates. We recommend that the instructor make a general written statement in the syllabus stating that students requesting accommodations should discuss it with him/her as soon as possible after class or during office hours. There is an example of a syllabus statement in the new DSP&S faculty handbook that could be incorporated into any class syllabus. In addition, the instructor could make a verbal statement to the class and ask that students discuss accommodations with the instructor privately, to avoid pressuring students to self identify in front of the class.

2. Many DSP&S students take their exams in the testing center. When the instructor wants students in class for lecture before the exam and then releases DSP&S students to take the exam in the testing center, an awkward situation can arise. At that point, the instructor could make a general statement such as “students taking their exams in the testing center should leave the classroom now.” A general statement is much more comfortable for the student than “disabled students are now excused.”

3. If a student discusses an accommodation with the instructor, it is best to focus the discussion on the classroom or testing accommodations rather than on the disability itself. Although many students are comfortable in disclosing their disability with instructors, many are not, and have a right (FERPA) to keep personal information to themselves. For example, a student who has a medical disorder that necessitates frequent breaks during class to use the restroom may feel very uncomfortable discussing the reason with each instructor. Rather, a call to the DSP&S counselor is a better way to address the concerns because it doesn’t place a student in a position in which he/she feels pressured to divulge personal information due to the inherent power differential between student and teacher.

4. Finally, it is important for all of us to be aware of our own biases. A simple comment such as “you don’t look disabled” or a question such as “why do you need to sit at the front of class, are you blind?” may not be meant maliciously, but are clearly inappropriate and put the student in an extremely uncomfortable position.

We hope that these suggestions are helpful and we encourage instructors to call us directly with any concerns that arise in accommodating a student.