

Column: College Community Connection

Accommodating Students with Differences

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Many left-handed people observe International Lefthanders Day annually on August 13. The day's focus helps raise awareness about the inconveniences and frustrations left-handed people face in a world built for right-handed people.

I am right-handed. Most people are—nearly 90% according to some studies. As a right-handed person, I have never had to cope with scissors that failed to cut because of my grip. When I use a ruler to draw a straight line, my hand does not obscure the numbers measuring its length. Every time I write in a spiral-bound notebook, use a hand-operated can opener, or peel potatoes, I take advantage of the fact product designers work most frequently with people of my handedness in mind.

Historically, left-handedness carried a stigma. Although this is no longer the case, at least in most of the United States and other places where Western cultural patterns prevail, the English language retains remnants of past prejudices. For example, the word “sinister” means evil, malicious, or devious. The word comes from the Latin *sinister*, meaning left or left-handed. On the other hand, literally, the Latin opposite, *dexter*, for right-handed, shows up in English words such as “dexterity” (skill, agility, or nimbleness). A person with “two left feet” is awkward or clumsy, but a “right-hand” man or woman is a reliable helper.

Although contemporary culture no longer views left-handedness as a disability, left-handed students often benefit from using appropriate tools in order to accomplish learning tasks efficiently. Sometimes, these accommodations involve simple items, such as left-handed scissors or notebooks, but accommodations can also extend to complex issues, such as desk design and the ergonomics of computer stations.

In a similar way, students experiencing other needs can benefit from various modifications in the learning environment. Some students struggle and require accommodations because of physical or learning disabilities. Others have chronic health concerns or other challenges. At Southside Virginia Community College, our mission involves making sure every student has access to an education, and SVCC's commitment to equal educational opportunities includes providing reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Examples of accommodations include preferential seating, note-taking assistance, copies of instructor's notes, Braille books, adaptive software, private testing rooms or extended time on tests, and oral test administration.

Students with disabilities or chronic health problems are encouraged to identify themselves to a Disability Services Counselor to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations.

Students with physical access concerns can also learn about campus parking, wheelchair access availability, and evacuation plans.

Disabilities Services maintains confidential contacts and records. Disability is never indicated on college student records. For more information about accommodations, contact SVCC's Director of Counseling at 434-949-1063.

Dr. Al Roberts is president of Southside Virginia Community College, an institution of higher learning that provides a wide variety of education opportunities to a diverse student population within a service area that spans ten counties and the city of Emporia. He can be reached via email at al.roberts@southside.edu.