Case Study #2

Dr. Amanda Goodheart is a faculty member at Northern Colorado Community College (NCCC), where she teaches the introductory psychology course (PY100). Dr. Goodheart came to NCCC two years ago, after completing her doctorate at University of Texas. Dr. Goodheart’s position at NCCC is her first faculty appointment, and she is eager to develop her skills as an instructor. Her introductory psychology course is traditionally one of the largest classes at NCCC and is considered to be a gateway course for students in many majors. Because this course is a prerequisite for subsequent courses, enrolled students are typically first or second semester students. The lecture hall where PY100 is taught has fixed seating, with long connected tables that face the front of the room.

Dr. Goodheart lectures extensively on the information in the required textbook. She works hard to cover all of the goals and objectives that are described in the course syllabus that she hands to the students on the first day of class – a syllabus that she inherited from a series of previous instructors. Dr. Goodheart has attended several seminars on good teaching practices and has expressed a desire to give her students a more active role in their learning, but she is unsure on how to do this with such a large class.

Feedback from PY100 students during and after the course has been consistently negative. Students complain that exam questions don’t accurately reflect what was covered in class or in the textbook. In fact, exam results reveal that students often misunderstand key concepts. Dr. Goodheart has attempted to assign group projects, in hopes that she can foster greater involvement and communication among students to facilitate enhanced engagement with the course content and preparation for exams. But few students like the idea of group work, in that many commute to campus, work several jobs and have little extra time to get together outside of class. Dr. Goodheart is frustrated that few students come to her arranged office hours and even fewer attempt to make an appointment with her, despite her repeated encouragement that they do so. Dr. Goodheart describes a class environment where students are frantically taking notes and rarely look up to participate in discussion, except in the first weeks of class when students seem to ask the same questions repeatedly, i.e., questions about the grading system, assignments, expectations, and deadlines.

Dr. Goodheart recently found lecture notes that were left behind by several students in the class. She was struck by the diversity of note-taking styles and troubled to learn that many of the students were recording inconsistent, fragmented and incomplete information.

Each semester that Dr. Goodheart teaches PY100, at least one student requests an accommodation. Dr. Goodheart has heard the term “reasonable accommodation,” and she wonders whether some of the requested accommodations are appropriate or fair, in light of the expectations and requirements of the course. Some of the accommodation requests involve conversion of class handouts to formats that work with assistive technology, while others involve alternative testing options. Dr. Goodheart wants to do what is fair. However, she is nervous about expressing her concerns for fear that she may be perceived as being unwilling to support or accommodate students with disabilities and learning challenges.