

OAS Reasonable Academic and Housing Accommodation Analysis Process

What is the purpose of the academic and housing accommodation process?

The disability accommodation process in higher education, including St. Mary's College of Maryland (SMCM), is designed to prevent discrimination based on disability and ensure students have equal access and opportunity to the academic and campus experience. Unlike the K–12 accommodation model, which may adjust, modify, or lower academic standards to promote success, the college makes accommodation decisions based on what a student may need for equal access and opportunity and does not guarantee outcomes or specific accommodations. Standards and expectations are not adjusted, modified, or lowered.

How are reasonable academic and housing accommodation decisions made?

The Office of Accessibility Services (OAS) works with students through an interactive process to determine reasonable accommodations that support equal access and opportunity in academics and housing. The goal is to remove environmental factors that, when combined with a disability, limit a student's access or opportunities relative to other students.

Having a disability does not automatically mean a student will receive their preferred or requested accommodations. Accommodations are approved only when a disability, in combination with a specific aspect of the SMCM environment, creates unequal access or opportunity compared to other students in similar circumstances. The purpose of an accommodation is to remove that barrier and provide equal access – not to treat the disability itself, increase success, or guarantee a desired outcome. To receive accommodations, a student must demonstrate a clear, logical connection between their disability and the environment that creates an unequal impact or lost opportunity relative to other students. It is the student's responsibility to present this connection to OAS.

Each request is evaluated case-by-case, with decisions typically made within ten days, but can take up to four weeks after receiving all necessary information.

We rely on the following information to make informed decisions:

- Student narrative/history
- Third-party documentation from a qualified medical/health/counseling provider (with extent of documentation needed varied by the situation)
- Consultation with other members of the campus community, such as faculty members or the Housing Accommodation Committee (HAC) as necessary

What is the role of third-party documentation in determining reasonable accommodations?

Having documentation from a provider can help confirm a disability, but it does not guarantee specific accommodations. OAS reviews all information as part of a broader process. OAS is not required to implement a provider's recommendations, as these recommendations often do not consider the wider higher education landscape regarding disability accommodations.

OAS only approves accommodations that ensure equal access and opportunity, not those meant for the purpose of enhancing academic success, therapeutic benefit, or personal preference. When recommendations are beyond access, OAS may refer students to other campus resources for support.

Students benefit from providing (or may need to provide) third-party documentation for three reasons:

1. To develop an awareness of the student's unique situation.
2. To understand how the student's disability/health needs intersect with the structure and expectations of our campus and educational environment.
3. To allow for an informed decision about which accommodations will provide the student with access to the SMCM academic/campus experience given their unique needs.

What factors are considered when determining if an accommodation is reasonable?

OAS provides accommodations that support access and opportunity without changing core academic, housing, or campus standards. Students with disabilities are expected to meet the same requirements as their peers.

Requests that would lower academic standards are unlikely to be approved. OAS may consult with faculty to determine if an accommodation would fundamentally alter the course outcomes.

Every request goes through a structured review, and students can appeal decisions if needed.

Reasonable accommodations are most frequently provided when the accommodation would:

- Ensure equal access and opportunity, relative to peers, to learning, participation, and campus life without lowering academic standards and expectations.
- Address specific academic or campus barriers or factors within the environment that impact disabled students more than others.
- Not fundamentally alter the degree, course or experience expectations, learning outcomes, or general student experiences.
- Meet disability-related housing needs that can't be managed through personal strategies or existing campus support that any student who lives on campus must consider and incorporate to continue to be successful at SMCM.

When are academic accommodations potentially not reasonable?

Accommodations are determined on a case-by-case basis with consideration of the student's disability, the functional impact of the disability, and how this impact intersects with specific barriers or limitations within the academic environment. The goal is always to ensure equal access and opportunity to the academic experience.

Reasonable accommodations will vary by situation, however, accommodations are typically not approved if they:

- Are requests made only because a student has a disability without showing any connection to a barrier in the SMCM environment that affects them more than other students.
- Primarily enhance success without addressing a limitation in the academic or campus environment that is affecting a student with a disability relative to other students in the same or similar situation.
- Are preferences that would make the academic or campus experience better for the student, but do not address any specific limitation in the SMCM environment that affects the student more than others
- Address challenges that can otherwise be managed through personal strategies or general student support (time management, tutoring, different study strategies, etc.).
- Lower academic standards or essential learning objectives.
- Eliminate required skill acquisition or prevent accurate assessment of learning.
- Reduce expectations common to all college students (e.g., participation, time management, content mastery).
- Fundamentally alter the nature of a program.
- Pose health or safety risks to the student or others.

An accommodation that was approved in K–12 or at another college does not mean it will be approved at SMCM. Each school has its own process, which does not influence OAS decisions.

Sometimes, an accommodation may be reasonable due to a disability but not be reasonable in a specific course or setting. OAS may need to consult with faculty or other SMCM staff to decide if, and how, an approved accommodation can be implemented.

When are housing accommodations potentially not reasonable?

A housing accommodation is generally not provided for the following reasons:

- Solely to ensure the student is successful at SMCM. Accommodations in higher education are to provide access, not success.
- To ensure a quiet, solitary place for studying. The SMCM Library and Learning Commons have spaces available for students to study, which can be reserved online.
- To increase comfort or alleviate discomfort in the housing arrangement (such as by having a specific roommate or having a roommate free experience to avoid addressing typical roommate conflicts). The Counseling Center has a meditation room, which can be reserved and each hall has quiet, sensory-friendly rooms, which can be used to decompress away from a roommate.
- To ensure a private space for virtual appointments. The Wellness Center has a telehealth suite that can be reserved.
- To serve as an alternative to the student developing the skills, abilities, and practices necessary to effectively live on campus (through trial-and-error, coaching, roommate agreements, SMCM resources, such as the Counseling and Psychological Services or other strategies).
- When a request is meant for the housing space to serve as part of a student's treatment plan for their diagnosis or for SMCM to serve as a student's primary treatment or medical plan/resource.
- Due to financial concerns (whether related to disability or not).

Sometimes a housing accommodation may be reasonable for disability reasons but not possible in a specific housing situation. OAS works with the Office of Residence Life to explore other options when this happens. A requested accommodation may be unreasonable or not immediately possible if:

- All suitable rooms are already assigned for the semester – if approved for an accommodation, the student will be placed on a waiting list.
- It creates undue financial or administrative challenges for SMCM.
- It would fundamentally change housing policies that apply to all students.
- It poses a safety risk to others, the student, or property.