

# PRACTICE BRIEF

## Increasing Faculty Awareness of Students with Disabilities: A Two-Pronged Approach

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### Abstract

Many universities use a center-based model to deliver services to students with disabilities. A hybrid service delivery model utilizing a center-based disability resource and faculty mentors was recently implemented in a large, public university in the Northwestern United States. Noticeable improvements observed to date include increased administrative support, positive collaborations with teaching center staff, and increased faculty awareness of resources for instructing students with disabilities.

*Keywords: faculty mentorship, postsecondary education, center-based disability resources*

Institutions of higher education are often unprepared to deliver high quality services to increasing numbers of students with disabilities (Orr & Hammig, 2009). One major factor contributing to this challenge is an ongoing need for faculty to understand instructional and accommodation issues related to students with learning disabilities (Thomas, 2000; Villarreal, 2002). Vogel, Leyser, Burgstahler, Sligar and Zecker (2006) found that faculty members were interested in developing their knowledge of disability resource services and increasing their skills in providing accommodations to students with disabilities. This reported high level of interest is contradictory to the actual practice of faculty identified in other studies, who expressed reluctance to working with students with disabilities because they felt their instructional self-efficacy with this population was lacking (Mull, Sitlington & Alper, 2001; Muller, 2006). In the extant research, there appears to be little correlation between faculty effectiveness and students' academic success. There is, however, an identified relationship between student success and their perception of faculty support (Allsop, Minskoff & Bolt, 2005; Trojano, 2003). Maintaining high expectations for all students (Barazandeh, 2005; Madaus, Scott, & McGuire, 2003), maintaining a positive attitude (Denny & Carson, 1994), holding online office hours (Ficten et al., 2001); and inviting

students to speak with them about their learning issues (Hill, 1995) have been identified as faculty best practices for working with students with disabilities.

Markle (2007) and his colleagues at Ball State University created a Faculty Mentorship Program that reported success not only with students but with faculty members as well. This mentor group consisted of approximately 40 faculty members from a range of programs and departments. The faculty mentors participated in professional development workshops that focused on instructing students with disabilities and met regularly with students with disabilities on an individual basis. The observed outcomes for students working individually with a faculty mentor were higher grade point averages and a higher retention rate. Faculty members reported increased instructional self-efficacy and awareness of services for students with disabilities (Markle, 2007).

### The Problem

Though most campuses have an active Disability Resource Center (DRC) office for students, faculty members rarely consult with DRC personnel as a resource in a proactive manner (Muller, 2006). Instead, a faculty member is only apt to consult with a DRC staff member if a problem occurs between their course curriculum and their understanding of a student's ac-

commodations (Orr & Hammig, 2009). This scenario is reactive and increases complications in establishing meaningful relationships between students, faculty, and disability resource center staff. The goals of the strategies described in this article are to increase the awareness of the faculty regarding the institution's disability services and to assist them in their understanding and implementation of effective accommodations for students with disabilities.

### Strategy

A faculty mentorship program is in its first year of operation at Boise State University. Faculty mentors participate in two arenas: the Disability Advisory Group (DAG) and the Faculty Mentor Group (FMG). The first arena, DAG, is a university-wide committee composed of campus professionals from Student Diversity and Inclusion, Academic Technologies, University Housing, Disability Resource Center (DRC), Women's Center, faculty members from different colleges and departments, and students with disabilities. Faculty members participating in the FMG were invited to join this committee. The DAG committee meets monthly to discuss university-wide issues pertaining to students and staff with disabilities and explore possible solutions to problematic issues (see Table 1 for sample agenda items).

The second arena is the FMG, which meets monthly with the director of the DRC. The FMG is composed of, but not limited to, a faculty member from each major academic college. Faculty members who were recruited into this group met at least one of the following criteria: a history of working with students with disabilities (e.g., special education, disability services), involvement in preparation programs for future educators, involvement in current research about persons with disabilities, and instructors who regularly requested assistance from DRC staff while implementing students' accommodations. These instructors normally taught larger introductory level courses. The responsibility of a faculty mentor is to act as a liaison between students, other faculty in his/her department or program, and the DRC staff. This includes assisting students when self-advocating with faculty about their accommodations, assisting faculty in the provision of effective accommodations, supporting staff and faculty to resolve possible conflicts, and assisting in communication among all stakeholders. Faculty mentors have also offered their services to university administrators

(e.g., deans, provost, vice-presidents). Collaboration with university administrators provides opportunities to communicate to their college faculty the resources available to assist them with implementing inclusive practices in their respective courses.

The impetus behind developing the DAG and FMG was a student satisfaction survey administered by the DRC during the spring (2009) semester. Students who were registered with the DRC were invited to participate in a 53-question web-based survey developed using Qualtrics Research Suite (2009). An initial and follow up email were sent that requested feedback regarding services they were receiving and how their experiences could be improved (see Table 2 for examples of survey questions). Approximately 100 out of the 500 students who were solicited completed the online survey (19% response rate).

An informal analysis of survey results illustrated a need to improve faculty approachability and awareness of students' learning needs. Students reported a lack of faculty support for their academic endeavors; similar findings are reported in prior studies (Allsop, Minskoff & Bolt, 2005; Trojano, 2003). Nearly 20% of the respondents reported being less than satisfied with receiving accommodations from faculty and staff. Respondents' comments reinforced the identified area of concern with specific examples. Increasing students' level of perceived support from faculty and staff is the focus of future research and program evaluation efforts on our campus. Student satisfaction surveys will be administered each academic year to evaluate the effectiveness of support that students with disabilities experience during interactions with faculty.

Despite similar goals, the Boise State FMG differs greatly from the Faculty Mentorship Program at Ball State University. These differences reflect the many options available to faculty and staff who wish to create such programs on their campus. At Ball State, students with disabilities work one-to-one with faculty members who are also engaging in professional development (Markle, 2007). At Boise State, eight faculty members operate as college-level mentors to other faculty and administrators, develop university-wide professional development opportunities through the Center for Teaching and Learning (e.g. alternate assessments, Universal Design instructional practices) and operate as liaisons for students who do not perceive a high level of support from faculty. The faculty members participating in the FMG and DAG committees fulfill

Table 1

*Disability Advisory Group Agenda Items 2010*

Month	Example Items Covered
January	Purpose of group, Term of service, Meeting times, Student survey
February	Membership, UDI, Scanning of student textbooks, Assistive technologies
March	Expanding FMG, Spatial issues DRC, Translation services for student events
April	FMG update, Professional development for faculty CTL
May	DRC and DAG website, Student participation in DAG
June	Administrative support (Deans Council), ADA grievance process
August	Professional development UDI/UDL, FMG update
September	Animal use policy, Accessible parking, Student retention research
October	ADA grievance process, Housing for students with disability issues
November	DRC relocation, Testing area, ADA compliance officer
December	Faculty media center, Video lecture series, Assistive technology

Note. Agenda items taken from meetings' minutes; no meeting held in July due to agreed upon summer break.

Table 2

*Sample Student Survey 2009*

<u>Question</u>	<u>Response</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Rate your level of satisfaction with your overall experience at the university as a student with a disability.	5 Very Satisfied	39%
	4 Somewhat Satisfied	19%
	3 Adequate	18%
	2 Somewhat Unsatisfied	18%
	1 Very Unsatisfied	6%
	Comments	10
Requesting accommodations from DRC	5 Very Good	59%
	4 Good	19%
	3 Adequate	11%
	2 Fair	4%
	1 Poor	2%
	Did Not Use	4%
Do you believe university staff are responsive and cooperative in providing you with needed accommodations?	Comments	23
	Yes	85%
	No	15%
Do you believe university faculty members are sensitive to your needs?	Comments	12
	Yes	82%
	No	18%
	Comments	29

a substantial amount of the service component of their workload (typically 20% to 30%).

### **Observed Outcomes**

Nearly one year after the creation of the FMG, we have observed positive changes in the university environment. The paramount change is increased support from university administrators towards the delivery of DRC resources. Administrators allow FMG members to speak at college-wide faculty meetings and new-faculty orientations. Other positive outcomes include increased inclusion of accommodation statements in syllabi and improved communication of faculty members when assisting their colleagues in implementing classroom accommodations. Having administrative support is a key component when implementing any program that is expected to influence an organization on a systemic level. After meeting with a faculty mentor about the inclusion of students with disabilities to their courses, one college dean incorporated a measurement of universal design practices into the next accreditation process.

Faculty mentors have also collaborated with Center for Teaching and Learning staff in their course development workshops. These annual workshops assist faculty in the creation or revision of curricula and instructional practices designed to enhance student learning. In 2010, the FMG successfully promoted the Center for Teaching and Learning's promulgation of universal design practices in traditional and online courses. This important collaboration between FMG members and Center for Teaching and Learning staff will continue each academic year. An increase in the inclusion of students with disabilities in DAG can be viewed as another positive outcome. Students now actively participate in the committee's proceedings and help shape the development of the committee's policies and procedures.

### **Implications**

Nationally, colleges and universities across the U.S. are reporting an increase in the number of students receiving accommodations. Extant research has identified challenges that campuses face in meeting the needs of this increasing population (Orr & Hammig, 2009). A major challenge is the lack of knowledge commonly found among faculty about instructing students with disabilities (Mull, Sitlington & Alper, 2001; Muller, 2006). In order for postsecondary institutions to meet

these needs, faculty should be informed and comfortable with students' diverse learning needs. College instructors are more willing to support students with disabilities if they perceive sufficient support from other staff and faculty (Zhang et al., 2010). While they tend to be aware of their legal requirements to provide accommodations, faculty need more exposure to students with disabilities in order to look past identified differences and discover commonalities among all students.

Creating a group of faculty mentors and an advisory group on disability has produced positive results for faculty members and staff (e.g., increased support, professional development, increased communication). Although possible benefits of this two-pronged approach have yet to be measured at the student level, it is hoped that students with disabilities will experience a higher level of satisfaction with their university experience as well. The creation of the FMG and DAG programs began with the invitation from the Disability Resource Staff. A recommendation for other professionals who would like to replicate these programs, or create a new approach, would be to survey your institution's needs and then invite stakeholders from various departments to form a multi-disciplinary team. This team could then develop their own solutions and timelines to meet identified needs at the student and institutional level.

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