Disabilities and Student Affairs: Our Role and Responsibility

As a person who was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) in 1995, I find it fascinating to see that the in-depth study of disabilities, both visible and invisible, has been so inextricably woven into the web of post secondary education. I was in my undergraduate studies at Eastern Oregon University when I was diagnosed with OCD. There was little known about the disorder - and even less known about possible treatments - at that time. Today, as I found in the four articles referenced herein, much has been learned about the accommodations and advising needs of students with both physical and mental disabilities. Moreover, the research implicates the faculty and staff of our educational institutions as the focus for providing inclusive, positive environments where disabled students may flourish amidst their peers.

Students with disabilities have traditionally been underrepresented in study abroad programs (Hameister, 2004). This alarming fact is in the introduction of the first article that I read. As student affairs professionals, study abroad faculty members must understand how to provide equal opportunities to students with disabilities. In order to be fully capable of this, faculty need to be aware of the various different disabilities that might be afflicting students. An effective leader in student affairs should be in close contact with the disabilities office on their campus and aware of current research in the
field of special education. As is often the case in student affairs, professionals must take it upon themselves to keep up to date on relevant bodies of knowledge.

Now that the study abroad professional is up to date on the current issues in disabilities research, it is time to attempt to understand the desires and needs of the individual student. [In] a survey of 64 students with disabilities … students overwhelmingly favored an inclusionary study abroad program, as opposed to a program just for students with disabilities (Hameister, 2004). This notion of inclusiveness appears in each of the articles that I read. Students with disabilities have not only been underrepresented in the past, but they have historically been isolated and segregated as well. Furthermore, each student will be the best resource as to his/her needs for accommodation (Hameister, 2004). Therefore, faculty members must first learn to accommodate, and then be the active agent involving disabled individuals in all student functions.

The article by Hameister focused upon students with physical, as well as mental disabilities. The second article that I read deals exclusively with psychiatric disabilities. A student with a psychiatric disability in postsecondary education may be one of the most misunderstood and under-served students in college (Souma, 2004). While physical disabilities present challenges that are undeniable, emotional disabilities are often
in invisible. It is not obvious that an accommodation is needed (Souma, 2004) when a
student with mental illnesses approaches us. This often times makes it even more
difficult to determine cause and affect relationships between students and faculty.

Attempting to diagnose a seemingly unstable student is not the role of the student affairs
professional. However, when a student openly reveals that a problem exists, it is
important for faculty to know where to look for advice and how to appropriately support
and positively influence the individual in order to achieve the desired outcomes. This
article outlined a model called “universal design” which essentially details an
environment where all individuals can succeed by anticipating a variety of student needs
and maximizing the potential usability of available materials.

Even more specific to student affairs professions in particular is the third article
that I read in the most recent NACADA Journal. Thanks to the diligence of
professionals in the advising field, developmental advising models have been designed to
specifically meet the needs of students with learning disabilities (LD). Support programs
need to consider the possibility that some students with LD attending their institutions
may need at least as much social as academic support (Ryser, 2005). This article
identifies four essential themes that arose from surveys and focus groups: social-
emotional issues that students present in the advising relationship; advisor challenges and
responses to presenting issues; sources of advisor support; and monitoring of student medication. Understanding these themes as they are outlined in this article has shown me that so much more than course requirements need to be known in order to succeed as an academic advisor. Advisors must have a keen understanding of their advisees’ evolving social and emotional needs and have strategies to address those needs appropriately (Ryser, 2005).

When working with students with LD’s, it is critical that the student affairs professional be aware of the many emotional issues that accompany any of the various disorders. With our commitment to the student’s personal and professional growth and development comes a necessity for empathy. In order to display the appropriate response to the student while exhibiting concern, one must be tactful and honest. However, there is also a level of expertise that should be gained by studying the research, such as in this article, before an advisor steps into an encounter with a severely disturbed student. Ryser (2005) suggests that the four strategies in this article will allow advisors to keep the personal domain in balance with educational and career exploration.

The last article that I read brings me full-circle to the importance of inclusiveness to the student with disabilities. Inclusive schooling is: the integration of students with special education needs into the general classrooms and schools they would
attend if they did not have a disability (Winzer, 2002). Student affairs professionals can be instrumental in helping disabled students make the often-difficult transitions into the general student population. The opportunities to help such students is a special part of our jobs; and in our capacity as faculty, we must be knowledgeable of the conditions and appropriate accommodations for each individual.

Students today are fortunate to have an academic community that is dedicated to understanding, documenting, and teaching the newest breakthroughs in disabilities research. In student affairs, we need to be a part of this same community and incorporate this knowledge into our professional competencies. If I am ever lucky enough to assist a student diagnosed with OCD, I vow to provide that student with a level of experience and expertise that I never was afforded as a college student back in 1995.

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References


