Whose Job Is It, Anyway?

The population of students with significant mental health disabilities is growing steadily on college campuses today. As we begin the class, in a few weeks, we’ll take a look at the literature and speculate on WHY we are seeing that increase. For now, let’s just accept that it is real.

When LD students first started to show up in large numbers on college campuses, I often did a presentation for faculty at the campuses I visited called, “Where Did All These LD Students Come From, and What Am I Supposed to Do With Them?” It was a very popular title, because faculty were feeling more than a little frustrated with what they saw as intrusions into their classroom. All of a sudden they were being told they were responsible for doing things—and doing them differently!—for a whole lot of students who someone said were “disabled,” but who looked just like every other student in class. Heck—faculty weren’t trained as special education teachers. Why were they being saddled with this responsibility?

That was in the 80’s—even before the ADA was passed. We’ve come a long way in the time since then. I am not suggesting that faculty are always happy about providing appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities, but along with the rest of the campus community, they recognize that they are legally obligated to do so, so they will. Faculty members may quibble about specific accommodations along the way, but they know that students with disabilities are here to stay, and they (most willingly, sometimes grudgingly) acknowledge that students with disabilities belong here.

Enter the large (and growing) number of students with mental health problems. It isn’t necessarily that faculty don’t know what to do for these students—it is that many of them don’t see why they should have to change anything. These days, instead of “where did all these students come from and what I am supposed to do with them?” it might just as well be, “where did all these students with mental health problems come from and WHY ARE YOU BOTHERING ME WITH THEM???”

It isn’t that the accommodations we sometimes assign for this population are necessarily different than accommodations assigned to other students with disabilities over the years. There just seem to be so many of them impacting on the time and attention of the faculty member. When you have a wheelchair user in the class, it is up to the DSS office to make sure that everything is accessible. A deaf student in class? It’s not up to the faculty member to line up the sign language interpreters. Yeah, a lot of LD and ADHD students have asked for extended time and quiet proctored settings for testing over the years. But on many campuses, that means the faculty member has to arrange for the test to be sent over to DSS or the Testing Center to be monitored— they aren’t asked to take the extra time to do the proctoring themselves. Faculty used to have an occasional request for extended due dates/deadlines, or
for attendance leniency. “But now, the @#$%^ disability services office seems to be assigning those accommodations for most of the kids who go through that office.” The faculty blame us for the significant increase in the number of students with mental health disabilities and the accompanying drain on our time. But it isn’t our fault.

Then whose fault is it? The people in Admissions?

Of course not. Besides the fact that the Admissions Office isn’t out specifically recruiting students with mental health disabilities, we certainly wouldn’t want the folks in Admissions to be trying to act as gatekeepers and keep out qualified students with mental health disabilities (and make no mistake – these students usually ARE academically qualified under whatever requirements are in place at the institution). But the fact is that the folks in Admissions have no more of an idea of the implications of a significant mental health issue on the student’s time at the institution than do the faculty.

I made a half dozen phone calls to DSS providers earlier this week, in preparation for writing this piece. I asked folks to think about the students with mental health disorders currently being supported through their offices, and to estimate how many of those students came into the institution with a history of having been identified and served as students with mental health disabilities while in high school, versus the number who were receiving support for the first time now that they were in college. The estimates ranged from only about 5% of the students having been served before, to closer to 50/50. But all agreed that there are a significant number of students with this diagnosis that were NOT identified or served in high school. Those students would certainly never trigger any different outreach efforts from the Admissions/Recruitment folks, because they presumably had a typical high school career.

For those students who WERE identified and served in high school, I asked what kind of accommodations/modifications they got at the high school level (and thus were expecting when they got to college?). The three things that seemed to appear on everyone’s list were some kind of testing accommodations, consideration/leniency in attendance, and extended deadlines and due dates. Those are likely to be accommodations that have been used on your campus, for other populations, over the years. So IF someone from Admissions was asked by the student/parent if such consideration would be available for them if they came to your school, would the Admissions rep have any reason to hesitate in assuring the candidate that those things WERE available? They (the Admissions people) are not likely to understand that just because the accommodation was given in high school doesn’t mean WE will give it in college, or that we may give the accommodation to the student with restrictions that were never a part of their high school experience.

[Interestingly, when I was speaking to the service providers about their Admissions folks, several of them said that they work closely with their Admissions Office on an ongoing basis to make sure that Admissions knows that if questions about accommodations are raised, they should refer the student/parent back to DSS. They are not to promise anything or discourage anyone. They are to defer to DSS. Think you are safe? Think again. Who do you think
represents your college at college fairs that are outside your geographic area (the area that your own admissions folks can feasibly travel to)? In my experience, for those far-flung college fairs, the Admissions folks track down some local alum in the area to represent the college. And who do you suppose trains THEM as to what to say – or what NOT to say – to students who inquire about services for students with disabilities? Just asking!]

So what’s my point? If students with mental health disabilities are here to stay in increasing numbers, and if faculty are annoyed at the impact on their classrooms and their time, and if the Admissions folks are oblivious to the issues that arise for this population in trying to manage a college career – so what? What can or should be done about it?

I don’t know. But I DO know that providing an inclusive campus experience for this population of students isn’t going to happen simply by having the DSS folks assign a few accommodations along the way. We are going to need to change attitudes, information, and actions of a whole lot of people in the campus community (not just faculty, not just Admissions, but EVERYONE). And the first step is to talk about it… with EVERYONE!

See you in class?
Janie

Why does life keep teaching me lessons I have no desire to learn?

There is an old and very wise Native American saying: “Every time you point a finger at someone, there are three remaining fingers pointing right back at you.”

I know everything happens for a reason, but sometimes I wish I knew what that reason was.