**February 25, 2022**

**Are We Doing Enough?**

Today’s post is a “first” for me. It is an opinion piece. Not MY opinion. YOUR opinion.

Typically, I am not shy about giving you my opinion on the things discussed in these essays. This time, I can lay out the issue, but I am not sure I have an opinion. Just lots of questions. If you have the time, I would like to hear from you on this subject.

The more I read about efforts to make substantive changes in the way higher ed does business – changes that make a *real* difference in matters of equity and supporting traditionally marginalized populations – the more frustrated I get. I keep trying to figure out what we can do, from the disability services office, that would make a substantive difference. I am not talking about getting students with disabilities acknowledged as part of DEI initiatives and having other offices on campus think about their policies and procedures in terms of impact on students with disabilities. I am talking about what we can be doing in OUR practices and procedures that would make the delivery of services to students with disabilities more equitable for traditionally marginalized populations (for example, students from racial and ethnic minorities or low income students).

It seems to me that the most obvious area to target would be our documentation policies and procedures. It is no secret that a focus on definitive third-party documentation before acknowledging a student’s disability or the need for accommodation favors students with means. It isn’t just that they can access quality care and get detailed documentation, or *buy* a diagnosis if they have enough money to shop around for someone to write the correct letter. It is that students without strong financial resources may have limited access to health care (including mental health options), or come from school districts with less resources and thus have less intensive experiences in getting support throughout their K-12 careers. The more expensive it is to get a comprehensive evaluation of disability related needs, the less easily students with limited means will be able to meet our paperwork requirements. The more limited the special education resources in the school, the less likely that the student will have relevant experience to build on in framing their requests at the postsecondary level. It’s not the false positives that I worry about so much as the false negatives. The problem has been obvious for some time, but I am still not sure what the solution should/could be.

It has been a decade since AHEAD’s guidance was first released, encouraging us to give significant weight to student self-report in establishing disability and the need for accommodation. Giving more credence to student self-report in reviewing documentation would seem, on the surface, to address the problem of equity, at least a little. For students who can’t afford more formal documentation, we might rely more heavily on their own description of their difficulties in making the key determinations (is this a person with a disability and do they need an accommodation for equal access?). But when AHEAD proposed the new guidance, with added emphasis on student self-report, it was NOT done in an effort to create equity. It was done in an attempt to honor the lived experience of the student and to mine their personal experiences for clues as to how best to support their individual needs. A noble goal – but nothing to do with equity. In fact, I am beginning to wonder if focus on student self-report isn’t just as limiting for disadvantaged students as would be heavy reliance on third-party documentation.

I read an article this week that spoke to the fact that college admission counselors are moving away from relying on letters of recommendation in making admission decisions. Why? Because students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have access to teachers and counselors who have the time and the wherewithal to write letters of the same caliber as those that are available to students with means. It isn’t that the students are less worthy – they just don’t have the same access to people who can showcase their talents and abilities with equal effectiveness.

It made me wonder. If we shifted our documentation policies and procedures to put more emphasis on student self-report for students who were unable to produce objective, third-party documentation, would it significantly improve the chances for disadvantaged students to establish their status as students with disabilities in need of accommodation? Or would we find that the narrative provided by these students in their self-report lacked the kind of detail that we have started to rely on from self-report that encourages us to use it as a supplement or (in some cases) substitute for more formal documentation? In other words, is “student self-report” a biased criteria, favoring students of means who have had past experience with assessment and support for their disability? Would we simply be substituting one inequitable means of information gathering for another?

As I said, I have no answers here. I am anxious to hear from you with suggestions on how to make our internal process for considering and acting on documentation more equitable. If you have any thoughts on the matter, I invite you to hit “reply” an send them along. Your response will come only to me. I’ll report back on those responses in a future *Last Word* offering.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Janie

*They say the world ain’t fair. WRONG! The world is fair. It’s people who aren’t.*

*To make a difference in someone’s life, you don’t have to be brilliant, rich, beautiful or perfect. You just have to care.*

*I am no longer accepting things I cannot change. I am changing things I cannot accept.*