**March 4, 2022**

**It’s Not What We’re Used To, But…**

Last week I spoke about my quest for ways to make the delivery of disability services more equitable for students with disabilities from traditionally marginalized populations. We focused on the issue of documentation and speculated on whether relying more heavily on student self-report would make the intake process any less biased than relying on third party documentation. The same students who did not have the means or opportunity to access quality professional assessment of disability might also not have had the same scope or depth of experience with services and support in the past to provide a compelling self-report.

I want to expand on that theme today. In reading over some of your comments and suggestions, and in pursuing other sources, I am realizing more and more that for years we have been making faulty assumptions and generalizations in our provision of disability services that have inadvertently created barriers to disability support services for students from traditionally marginalized populations. We have made our services equally available to all disabled students, but perhaps not equally useful.

Let’s back up. I read a fascinating article this week in Inside Higher Education about students who are classified as “first generation students” by the Federal government (tinyurl.com/IHE-LevelsOfFirstGeneration). The authors of the study have identified four different levels of “first-generationness,” from students who grew up in homes where neither parent and no one they know had ever attended college, to students whose parents attended college but never graduated, to students who parents didn’t attend college but whose siblings graduated from college, to students whose parents had no college experience but who had siblings and extended family members who were college graduates. Under the federal definition, they are all “first generation students” and entitled to participation in a variety of federal programs and support (and are increasingly sought after by colleges and universities who are looking to increase the diversity of their student body without relying on traditional affirmative action activities. But the needs of students in those four different levels of first-generationness are significantly different. Some are very prepared to take advantage of the opportunities presented to them. Others will need significant guidance and support to understand what opportunities are being presented and how best to leverage them.

You see where I’m going with this, right?

Traditionally, we have talked about documentation of disability as providing two things – verification that this IS a person with a disability, eligible for protection under the law, and information that tells us what, if any, accommodation the student may need in order to have equal access. While we have argued amongst ourselves as to what constitutes appropriate documentation of disability, and agonized over whether certain accommodation are, or are not, appropriate from both the standpoint of the student’s disability and in the context of the curriculum, once we determined to grant an accommodation, it seems we rarely have explored whether the student is ready to *use* the accommodation we are assigning. We have ASSUMED that the student will now have equal access, and we moved on. Bad assumption.

Effectively using the assigned accommodation to support that equal access may hinge on the student’s knowledge of the accommodation, and THAT may hinge on their experience in using the accommodation in the past. I don’t believe we have done an adequate job of exploring that past usage with many students. For example…

[Oops – I just realized there are a number of new readers with us who have not been introduced to my daughter, Cottie, and you need the basics of her profile to understand what I am about to say. Cottie has cerebral palsy. She uses a motorized wheelchair and needs attendant care for ADL. She signs, instead of speaking, as her speech is not very intelligible to those who don’t know her. That doesn’t stop her from talking back. She is bright and beautiful and smarter than I am (don’t tell her I said that), but significantly limited by her disability.]

Now… for my example. When Cottie was in high school, she received extended time for testing, so when she got ready to go to college, extended time was on the list of requested accommodations. No problem. Watching her laboriously attack the keyboard with one finger was plenty enough to see that extra time was justifiable. Except… in high school, when Cottie took her tests, they sent her to the Learning Center with her laptop to take her test, and to come back when she was finished. Whenever she was finished. Most of the time, double time was probably enough time, but it was never tested because they didn’t care. “Come back when you are finished.”

When she got to college, she was assigned double time for testing. She took one class online. The test for that class was provided with double time and, since she was taking her test unmonitored (at home, at a time of your choice), the screen included a countdown clock in the upper right corner that showed her how much time she had left before her double time was over and she would be shut out. That #@#% clock completely disrupted her concentration and her performance. She didn’t figure out until halfway through the semester that she would be better off to block off the corner of the screen so she couldn’t see the clock. By then it was too late.

When we assign “extended time on tests” to all students with disabilities, we generally assume that they have experience with using extended time on tests before. What if they don’t? What if their experience in high school was with extended time in the classroom – they got an extra 10 minutes before the teacher came and took their test away, while everyone else in the class started in on the next lesson at the end of regulation time? What if in high school they got extended time on essay exams, but not on multiple choice, or received extended time from some teachers but not others? Think it doesn’t happen that way? Have you ever asked?

Just recently, in a discussion about attendance leniency and extended deadlines and due dates, someone challenged the use of the accommodations because they generally are not granted nearly as often to students from traditionally marginalized populations as they are to students with means. The question posited was, “Isn’t this just another example of an accommodation of privilege?” Maybe not.

I found an interesting quote in something I was reading about the possibility of eliminating penalties or late work – providing extended deadlines and due dates to everyone:

*Research shows that first-generation college students are less likely to ask for extra time to complete their work. As educator Myron Dueck explains, late penalties can make final grades a “measure of compliance and socioeconomic opportunity rather than learning.”*

It was the first sentence that jumped out at me. If students with less higher education “acumen” are less likely to ask for extra time to complete their work, it wouldn’t be surprising to find they are less likely to ask for attendance leniency. Or extended time on tests. Or notetakers. Or…??? I am guessing that most of us have gone with the traditional idea of reviewing requests for accommodations from students to determine if they are appropriate. What if the very act of requesting is influenced by their different past experience?

On the other hand, it isn’t all that uncommon for us to suggest an accommodation to a student who hasn’t officially requested it – for example, notetakers, or extended time, or use of assistive technology. They are things that we have in our “accommodation arsenal” at the college level that we realize they may not have had access to before and don’t know to ask for. Makes sense. Now… how many times have you suggested the accommodation of extended deadlines/due dates or attendance leniency to students who didn’t come to you with the request? Uh, huh. I thought so. Maybe we see those accommodations being used most frequently by students with means because they are the ones who know it is OK to ask for (push for?!?) those accommodations.

Even when you DO offer up accommodations that the student hasn’t requested of you, do you take the time to make sure they know how best to use those accommodations? If you provide access to assistive technology without providing training on how that technology is to be employed for educational purposes, have you really provided access?

But… but… it isn’t our job to train them on how to be a productive disabled student. It is simply our job to see that they have equal access to the same opportunities everyone else has. What they do with those opportunities isn’t our responsibility. ***Maybe it should be.*** If we want to make sure that students with disabilities from traditionally marginalized populations are getting equal benefit from the services and support available through the disability services office, maybe we are going to have to do more for them, learn more about their past experience, spend more time orienting them.

But… but… we simply don’t have time to engage in that kind of intervention with every student. Not even with every student from a marginalized population. We are short-staffed as it is, and we are barely able to assure we are getting everything done that is legally required. ***Make time.*** I don’t know how to organize things, or who to pull in to help, or what kind of programming you might consider. I am simply suggesting that if you are really serious about wanting to see that the services/support of your office are equally valuable to all students with disabilities, you may need to be prepared to do things differently for some students.

While I am trying to figure out what suggestions to make to “do things differently” (might make a good class for next fall!), I did come up with one very practical idea that every one of you could implement right now, if you chose to. We all know that conversations with incoming students frequently revolve around the differences between IDEA and 504/ADA, and explaining the realities of being a college student with a disability. There is an underlying assumption that since 504/ADA are the same, no matter what the setting of the institution (community college, 4-year state institution, small private institution), the realities of being a college student with a disability are the same, too. ANOTHER bad assumption. Do you provide the same services, in the same way, as the next school down the road (from testing center rules, to accessing notetakers, to requesting accommodations)? No… and you don’t need to. Each school is entitled to make its own decisions about how support will be provided. When was the last time you sat down with a student transferring into your institution after having a college experience elsewhere, and questioned how accommodations were provided at the previous institution and explained how those same accommodations would be handled in your setting? Why not? I’m betting it is because most transfer students don’t know that they should ask about different policies/procedures, and are muddling through the changeover on their own.

There is your assignment, then. Make it easy for them to ask. Find someplace on your website to put up a little notice that says, “Transfer students should make an appointment to come and talk to us about how accommodations were managed at your previous institution, so that we can help you better understand how we do things here.” Reach out. Invite students in that unique group to ask for more – and be ready to give it if they do!

Janie

*You don’t have to be great to get started, but you have to get started to be great.*

*One reason people resist change is because they focus on what they have to give up instead of what they have to gain.*

*Stop being afraid of what could go wrong and start getting excited about what could go right.*

*There is no way I was born to just pay bills and die.*