

Erin Schneiderman has spent nearly ten years in higher education and has worked with students from a variety of backgrounds including students who are labeled at-risk. Included in this group are International students who are far from home, student-athletes, students on financial aid, veterans, first-generation students and students utilizing disability resource services. Erin feels strongly that regardless of a student's background, they should all be treated with dignity and offered the same opportunity to learn as their peers. In this paper, Erin displays her understanding of the Disability Resource Center at Arizona State University by conducting an interview with the Assistant Director of the Center.

Understanding Student's Needs, a Look at the Disability Resource Center at
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The purpose of the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at Arizona State University (ASU) is to ensure students with disabilities have equal access and the same opportunity to enjoy success as students without disabilities while staying in compliance with the university and the accreditation body's expectations. Within the team of 30 DRC employees, student workers and management interns (work 20-hour weeks and receive benefits); Ms. Tara Grant is the Assistant Director of the center. Grant has held the position for three years after transitioning from TRiO, which is a federal outreach, and student services program designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. (unknown, 2017) It was a natural and exciting fit for Grant and she loves the challenge of her ever-changing role. (T. Grant, personal communication, November 16, 2017).

The staff at the DRC reports to a Dean of Students at their respective campuses. That Dean reports to one of two Assistant Vice Presidents of Student Services who ultimately reports to the Executive Director of Student Services at ASU. Grant explains the organizational structure as complicated and frequently changing.

Educating the community (students, faculty, staff, and guests) about accessibility and disability is one of the goals of the DRC. They are constantly trying to explain what it feels like to have a disability and advocate for their students through education. Grant explained that making classes accessible is another goal (which is actually fairly difficult in her words) and they also strive to empower students to self-advocate. To accomplish their goals, the DRC is always thinking of ways to raise awareness and shift the culture at ASU. One method is to get students involved across all campuses. Groups made up of DRC students participate in awareness events and activities by setting up tabletop displays to educate event attendees. They typically do not create their own events, but find ways to become involved in existing ones. If the DRC hears about an event that is happening, they will often work with the organizers to ensure they are thinking of ways to include their community. For example, movies in the park excludes the deaf community, but the DRC can offer a solution by adding captions to the movie. In addition, if an event takes place on a grass surface, the DRC can recommend solutions by adding ramping, which would include guests in wheelchairs.

Grant explained that students who seek support from the DRC are labeled at-risk because they do not start school the same way as students without a disability. They tend to start behind the curve because they are not able to access information in the same way (such as reading a syllabus or having the correct type of computer software.) The DRC strives to create a level playing field and ensure a student is ready to learn at the beginning of each semester. Most students who seek support from the DRC come from a background with a "champion," a person who has pushed them to be successful their entire lives or they have experienced the opposite with people telling them that they are not good enough to see results. Many times, they are first generation students. One common thread is that students in the DRC take longer to graduate because they take fewer classes at a time and amass more student loans.

Although they have not articulated their student outcomes, the DRC has grown exponentially over the past few years and ASU was not prepared for the growth. Grant attributes the growth to an increase in reports of students citing anxiety and stress disorders. In an article focusing on mental health problems in college students (James, 2017), the author cites factors that lead to anxiety and depression to include; being away from home for the first time, access to alcohol and drugs and the rigorous demands of academic life. These are all situations that Grant admits she comes across in the students she supports.

Grant refers to herself as a data nerd. She assess ASU's DRC by comparing statistics, data and the growth of the student population each year to find commonalities and trends. DRC students complete a survey at the end of each year measuring satisfaction and they make improvements based on suggestions and internal brainstorming. In the coming years, Grant would like to focus more on outreach to high school students. Laws are very similar for students in K-12 and higher education with one major difference, higher education cannot modify curriculum for students. In college, all students must complete the same work as their peers to be eligible to graduate. Instead of modification, counselors use accommodations. Grant would like to ensure students, special education teachers and parents are familiar with the college level expectations before they make the transition. To become more embedded in the special education system in high schools would be a huge advantage once students arrive at the college level. She would also like to redevelop the DRC website and make it more user friendly.

It was observed that in an eight-hour day, each DRC staff member meets with an average of 8-10 students. Counselors are typically booked throughout the day with appointments, but also accept walk-ins. Student needs range from intake meetings (first appointment with their counselor where their disability is discussed), routine one-on-one meetings to ensure students are staying on task, exams (based on the accommodation needed, students can take exams in a private, with additional time and/or with a scribe.) Qualifying for the DRC is not a simple undertaking. After completing an application, the student is assigned a counselor who will evaluate his or her disability, talk about their needs and determine eligibility. From there, it is up to a student to re-enroll each semester as accommodations are evaluated on an individual basis, case-by-case, and course-by-course throughout a student's time at ASU. It is up to a student to define their success by utilizing the DRC's resources, not up to the counselors to constantly assist students through their college experience.

Grant helped paint the picture of the importance of the DRC, but I also wanted to understand the student's point of view so I spoke with Nick Penna a graduate student who qualifies for eligibility due to a vision disability. Penna attributes good communication and a strong connection to his counselor as the most important factors in working with the DRC. "When I have a strong relationship with my advisor, I feel more confident seeking support," Penna said. Although Penna acknowledges he is an at-risk student he says his motivation to be successful keeps him in school. His brother and sister suffer from the same ailment and they are struggling through life. Penna acknowledges that by staying in school, he will not be tempted to go down the same path. (N. Penna, personal communication, November 17, 2017).

Grant stated that students with disabilities tend to take longer to graduate. Further, only 41 percent actually graduate compared to 52 percent without disabilities nationally (Resmovitz, 2014). Students in the DRC tend to take fewer classes per semester as some function better only focusing on one or two classes at a time. This leads to higher loan debts which results in graduating students starting behind the curve yet again with high loans to pay off. Luckily, under federal law, many students are protected against having to make unaffordable monthly payments (Frotman, 2017). It has been stated that people with disabilities are twice as more likely to be unemployed than those without so this income-driven payment protection for students coming out of college is very important.

The staff at the DRC are committed to ensuring their students enjoy equal opportunity as their peers without disabilities, but resources are slim and mental health issues among college students are rising at an alarming rate. The good news is that students are seeking support. In a recent study of college freshman, it was noted that freshman who have a disability, disorder, chronic condition or frequently feel depressed are two to three times more likely to seek help than other freshman. (Aragon, Eagan, Stolzenberg, Zimmerman, Rios-Aguilar, Sayson, 2016)

This leads me to wonder if students seeking DRC support continues to increase, if this student support service will have the resources they need to meet the demand. The DRC currently serves 3,500 students across five ASU campuses. (Grant, personal communication, November 16, 2017) If trends continue to see more and more students in need of support, schools will have to invest many more resources (staff, time, faculty time) to meet their needs.

The good news is that there are other resources available for college students with disabilities if their school is not providing the support they are looking for. The National Center for College Students with Disabilities is the only federally funded national center in the U.S. for college students with any type of disability, chronic health condition, or mental or emotional illness. Students, parents and faculty can use their services and programs to find support. (unknown, n.d.) Their Disability Rights, Education, Activism and Mentoring (DREAM) program encourages students to become leaders of change on their own campuses, which aligns with ASU's goal of empowering their students to be their own advocates for change and education.

In conclusion, the DRC at ASU can be a hugely important resource for students with disabilities at ASU. The team works hard to support their students' needs and offer tools to be successful. With an increase in mental health issues being reported at the college level, the DRC is seeing more and more students seeking support. With government programs and loan payment-protection programs, students and support staff have multiple advocates to help them reach their independent goals of success.

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