According to their mission statement, the Office of Disability Services at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro “is committed to orchestrating the educational development of qualified students who have a physical or learning disability. Simultaneously, Disability Services continually works to improve understanding and support of the total University community toward this end. Students are encouraged to be independent and autonomous individuals who know their learning strengths and develop appropriate coping strategies for academic success. Disability Services serves as a supportive psychological environment so those students may achieve their educational objectives” (UNCG, 2002). In this issue of It’s Been Said... we will be spotlighting the role of the Office of Disability Services at UNCG. In doing so, we hope to introduce you not only to the mission of the Office, but also to the people of Disability Services; both the staff and the students that make up this diverse and dynamic group of UNCG family members.

During the 2001-02 academic year, the Office of Disability Services (ODS) worked with more than 350 students who reported a disability. The services offered by ODS are diverse, including serving as a resource for faculty, arranging for specific accommodations such as note-takers or interpreters for students with hearing impairments, and providing counseling, study skills training, and self-advocacy training for students. The staff includes the Director, Dr. Patricia Bailey; one Associate Director, Mary Culkin; one Assistant Director, Sherry Hillyard; an Interpreter Coordinator, Emily Freeman; and an Administrative Assistant, Zelda Vaughn. The members of the staff come from diverse backgrounds, including nursing, counseling, and special education, and they combine their wealth of experiences to help students with disabilities at UNCG to succeed. To find out more about these accomplished individuals, visit the Office of Disability Services website at http://ods.dept.uncg.edu.
Disability Services – A National Priority

The formal history of disability services in higher education dates back only about thirty years, to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 of that act prohibits discrimination based on disability in programs or activities receiving federal financial assistance. Prior to 1973, some students with disabilities did attend college, but there was no obligation on the part of the institution to provide access to programs or services for them. While colleges began to make accommodations for students with disabilities in a more systematic way following the 1973 legislation, the reforms were not widespread (Thomas, 2000). Additional protection from discrimination became law with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), which prohibits discrimination based on disability in public entities. The specific types of discrimination prohibited include denial of access to educational programs and facilities, denial of free appropriate public education for elementary and secondary students, and denial of academic adjustments or accommodations in higher education. The ADA was much more successful in producing widespread reform, partly as a function of the publicity surrounding it, and partly because of the requirement in elementary and secondary schools for individual education plans (IEPs). Students with disabilities, and their parents, became accustomed to asking for and being provided with appropriate accommodations for their needs (Thomas, 2000). It is important to note that the standards for disability provisions are different in elementary and secondary schools than they are in colleges and universities. The responsibility for providing IEPs for elementary and secondary school students rests with the school system, while the responsibility for requesting accommodations at the college level rests with the student.

The last ten years has seen substantial growth in the number of students reporting disabilities; 66,197 (6%) of the nation’s first-time freshmen at four-year public and private institutions in the 1999-2000 academic year reported having a disability (Henderson, 2001). However, the type of disability most often reported has changed; in 1994 learning disabilities were reported by

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Rights and Responsibilities of Students

Students have the right to:
- Confidentiality.
- Appropriate accommodations in a timely manner.
- Privacy when discussing needed accommodations with faculty.
- Appeal decisions regarding accommodations.

Students have the responsibility to:
- Provide disability services with appropriate documentation.
- Initiate requests for specific accommodations in a timely manner.
- Follow procedures with faculty and Disability Services in order to get appropriate accommodations.
- Notify disability services when an accommodation is not being provided correctly, or is no longer needed.
- Act as their own advocate, communicating effectively with disability services and faculty.

Rights and Responsibilities of Faculty

Faculty have the right to:
- Verification from disability services that a student is eligible for requested accommodations. Faculty do not have the right to view the documentation itself.
- Expect the student to initiate accommodation requests.
- Expect disability services to administer exams in a secure and monitored environment, if needed.

Faculty have the responsibility to:
- Identify essential functions, abilities, skills, and knowledge of their courses and evaluate students on this basis.
- Provide accommodations to students who are registered with disability services.
- Make students aware that they are responsible for requesting needed accommodations.
- Act in a timely manner to verify eligibility and/or provide accommodations.
- Treat all disability-related information as confidential.
- Clearly communicate testing and other classroom procedures to the student.

Adapted from the Ohio State University Partnership Grant Improving the Quality of Education for Students with Disabilities, available at http://www.osu.edu/grants/dpg/fastfact/rights.html

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25% of those reporting disabilities, while visual impairments were reported by a slightly higher percentage (27%). By 2000, learning disabilities had become the most prevalent, with more than 40% of students with disabilities reporting a learning disability while only 16% reported visual impairments (Henderson, 2001). Fortunately, colleges and universities have been changing as well; 98% of institutions reported that they provide at least some accommodations for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

As shown in Figure 2, UNCG has not been following the national trends in type of disability reported. The first graph below shows the percentage of several major types of disability reported by first-time, full-time freshmen at four-year institutions nationwide. The second graph shows the percentage of each type of disability reported by UNCG undergraduates. While there have been small increases in the percentage of learning disabilities reported (58% to 64%), UNCG has had nowhere near the growth that has been seen nationwide in that area. One explanation for the lack of growth may be that UNCG has consistently had a higher percentage of students reporting learning disabilities than the national average. More than 60% of students currently reporting disabilities at UNCG report learning disabilities compared to 45% nationwide (Henderson, 2001). Differences may also be explained by the imprecise nature of reporting learning disabilities. While UNCG includes Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) with Learning Disabilities, it is not clear where the national data places ADD. In neither case is ADD reported as a separate category.

It is interesting to note that not only does UNCG have a different proportion of disability types compared to the national trend, but also the total percentage of students who report disabilities is very different. Nationwide, the U.S. Department of Education (2002) reports that in 1999, 7.5% of undergraduate students in 4-year doctoral universities reported a disability; the percentage of students at UNCG reporting a disability was only 3.9% in the same year.

The passage of ADA has had a profound impact on the lives of students with disabilities, and at UNCG, the staff of ODS continues to grow and change to support the needs of our students.

Focus on Psychological Disabilities

As shown in Figure 2, the percentage of students with psychological disabilities is increasing at UNCG. One possible explanation is that advances in medications have allowed students who have previously been excluded to function more effectively in a college setting (Block, 2002). This kind of disability can encompass many diagnoses and behaviors, but is frequently not reported for fear of stereotyping.

Part of the challenge in working with students who have psychological disabilities comes in recognizing the signs and symptoms of various conditions. Students, faculty, and administration have been aware of depression in college students for some time, but other disabling conditions are not as well known. One psychological disability that may be less familiar is Asperger’s syndrome, which is recognized by symptoms similar to autism (Benica, 2002). Many students with Asperger’s syndrome are gifted with computers or math, but cannot relate to emotions or actions of people around them, and may exhibit a lack of social skills or exaggerated upset to a minor difficulty. While this can be disruptive within the university community, students can be taught ways to deal with the symptoms, and other students can be made aware of the condition. This kind of disability can best be accommodated by communicating with faculty and staff ahead of time, but students with psychological disabilities are often concerned about being stereotyped or watched more carefully than other students (Stigma a big issue, 2002).

Educating the university community about different types of disabilities is one way that ODS reaches out to the university community as a whole.
Disability Services at UNCG

The history of disability services at UNCG begins shortly after the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. A self-evaluation of UNCG’s need for disability services was completed by the Chancellor’s Office in 1978, and a coordinator was appointed soon after. The coordinator first operated from the Chancellor’s Office, then from Academic Advising, until a director was appointed in 1985 to oversee the Office of International and Disability Services. In 1988, Patricia Bailey joined the office as the program coordinator for Disabled Student Services, and today is the director of the Office of Disability Services (ODS).

The office served 24 students in 1983, but has grown enormously in the last 19 years, and served more than 350 students during the 2001-02 academic year. Figure 1 shows the growth in the number of registered students at ODS since 1988. The overall growth pattern has indicated steady increases each year, with the exceptions of 1990 to 1991 and 1993 to 1994, when the number of students remained relatively stable, and 2000 to 2001, when there was a significant drop in the number of students registered with ODS. There seems to be no simple explanation for the sudden drop in 2001, especially considering that UNCG had an overall enrollment increase, and a closer look at possible contributing factors is underway.

The increase in the number of registered students with disabilities has caused the number of staff at ODS to increase as well, requiring the addition of an Associate and Assistant Director, an Interpreter Coordinator, graduate assistants, and interns.

As technology has advanced, ODS has acquired devices that can assist students with visual or hearing impairments. The ODS, Jackson Library, and the EUC are equipped with IBM and Macintosh computers that have larger screens for easier reading and text scanning devices; ODS also has assistive listening devices that can be checked out for use in the classroom. As new advances continue in technology, ODS searches for additional tools to add to the office.

To assist the college community, the Office of Disability Services publishes two handbooks, one for students with disabilities and another for faculty and staff, that outline the services provided, resources available, and proper procedures for requesting and providing appropriate accommodations. Faculty and staff may obtain a handbook by contacting ODS. The student handbook is available online at http://ods.dept.uncg.edu/Handbook/. Students are encouraged to register with ODS as soon as possible after their acceptance into the institution, and are strongly encouraged to attend a SOAR session as well.

The Office of Disability Services is temporarily located in the Park Building, but plans to move to the renovated EUC in January of 2003.

Reflections from a Student
by Lauren Becton

My story is not typical. I was tested for and diagnosed with a learning disability in the middle of my junior year at Davidson College. For the first 13 years of my education, I had never shown signs of struggle, and so no one, including myself, ever suspected that I might not learn in the same way as my classmates. Until two years ago, I had no idea that I had developed what I now know were compensatory mechanisms. The signs came when I found myself in classes in which my differences could no longer be masked. The learning techniques that I had spent my entire life developing failed and the most frustrating result was that I felt like my academic performance was beyond my control.

I left to spend six months studying in France a few days after my diagnosis, but returned to Davidson for a final year that in many ways would be a second beginning. There is no universal cure for the many of us who find ourselves anomalies in the classroom and for all the disadvantages of a late-in-life diagnosis. I did have the benefit of being old enough to understand how I personally needed to relearn how to learn. I am still training myself to overcome obstacles that used to be insignificant, but most are manageable. After graduation, I came to Greensboro to do a post-baccalaureate year of study before applying to medical school, where I will have the opportunity to reach lifelong goals that three years ago seemed suddenly impossible to attain.
The Concept of Universal Design

Universal Design is “an approach to creating environments and products that are usable by all people to the greatest extent possible without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (Shaw & McGuire, 2002). Web sites can be created to be more accessible for all, distance learning courses can be designed with accessibility for all in mind, and professors can design classroom activities and handouts that are easier to see.

The Office for Civil Rights makes it clear that electronic communications and other uses of technology must be made accessible for students with disabilities, and notes that “The issue is not whether the student with the disability is merely provided access, but the issue is rather the extent to which the communication is actually as effective as that provided to others” (Shelton, 1996). It is important to make sure that the electronic material can be read and used by all when designing office websites, distance learning courses or using Blackboard in conjunction with classroom meetings. The following web sites can provide some guidance: Electronic and Information Technology Accessibility Standards – http://www.access-board.gov/508.htm and the World Wide Web Consortium’s Web Accessibility Initiative guidelines and checklists – http://www.w3.org/WAI/. These sites include guidelines for use of color, fonts, graphics and multimedia, image maps, tables, frames, style sheets, scripts, and navigation.

The flexibility provided by technology can make class materials more accessible for all, by making lettering clear, providing tags to describe pictures, and offering transcripts of audio sections. UNCG's Office of Instructional and Research Computing offers links, workshops, and guidelines to help faculty design the technological aspects of their courses in accessible ways.

What is “Reasonable Accommodation”

The ADA and Section 504 require that colleges and universities provide reasonable accommodation to students with documented disabilities. What seems reasonable to a student may not seem reasonable to a faculty or staff member. Below are some guidelines to clarify this issue.

1. The process must be interactive and involve “a reasonable reciprocal effort” by both parties.
2. An institution may not make a unilateral decision regarding the existence of a disability or the accommodation that is necessary.
3. What is “reasonable” involves a detailed analysis of the specific circumstances of the case in question.
4. The institution is not required to provide specifically what the student requests. An alternative may be provided if it is effective.
5. The institution does not have to provide accommodations that are not effective.
6. Institutions must be given a reasonable amount of time to evaluate requests and to offer the necessary accommodations.
7. Institutions do not have to provide accommodations that will impose an “undue administrative or financial burden.”
8. Challenges to student’s requests must clearly involve substantive questions regarding the manifestations of the disability or the nature of the accommodations requested.
9. Determining what is reasonable requires one to balance two important rights: the student’s right to be provided meaningful access and the institution’s right to protect the integrity of its programs and services.

References


The jewelry shown on page one was created by Vickey Rudd-LeMaster, a UNCG student who has established her own company “Tiny Treasures and Earthly Pleasures” to market her creations. If you are interested in seeing more of her work, you may contact her at tinytreasuresearthlypleasures@yahoo.com or at (336)686-4028.