

Disability Resources Office

Spring 2018

Newsletter

Welcome to the first issue of the Disability Resources Office newsletter. We hope to publish this newsletter once a semester to update the campus on what is happening in our office and how we can help you with your own work. This issue includes articles about changes to our office and new resources for faculty and students. It concludes with materials that were provided at the panel we hosted this semester to help faculty and students have better conversations about accommodations letters.

Please reach out to us with any feedback you may have, as well as what you’d like to see us include in future issues.

Staff and Organizational Changes

The first thing we want to call to your attention is our new name and organization. When Ute Gomez, our former Coordinator, retired last year, the College spun us out of the Counseling and Student Development Office and into our own stand-alone office as part of a commitment to improve the disability climate on campus. This was followed by more staffing changes. You may have already met Suzanne Sprague, our new Director, who was hired from SUNY Polytechnic Institute. Our longtime secretary, Diana McGee, also retired and has been temporarily replaced by Nicole Allen, our current Office Assistant. Finally, Jeremy Zhe-Heimerman is now serving as Assistant Director. Jeremy will continue to supervise the Test Administration Service in Memorial Library in addition to taking on new work for the office.

Name Change

You may have noticed this year that we are no longer called Student Disability Services. Our new name, the Disability Resources Office, reflects the changes that have been happening in our field in recent years. We subscribe to the social model of disability that has begun to spread through higher education. Under the old medical model, an office like ours may have been seen as the sole experts making decisions about what accommodations a student needs to use during their college career. Such an office would then provide services to those students to address their individual needs – hence our old name, Student Disability Services. The social model of disability, however, recognizes that disability exists in the interaction of an individual with accessibility barriers in society. Our primary focus, then, is on how to remove accessibility barriers on our campus. This will still involve individual accommodations for many students and referring students to campus resources like ASAP and Counseling. But it also includes our office serving as a resource to help our colleagues across campus efficiently remove barriers to access that impact students, employees, and the public.

How might this impact our relationship with faculty? We recognize that faculty have expertise in their content area and in their teaching methods that are crucial to include in making decisions about equal access. We want to partner with you on how to best remove the barriers that may present to students with disabilities in your courses. You will continue to receive accommodation letters from students, but as you know, when we assign those accommodations, we are coming up with ideas for removing barriers that emerge in “typical” classrooms. Of course, we understand that every instructor teaches differently. Some courses may require no accommodations while a tweak to course design could do the trick in others. Or maybe additional accommodations would be required that we did not think of when we first wrote the letter. Please view us as a resource to help you make your course fully accessible in a way that best fits your teaching style. We welcome discussions with you about how barriers can be removed most efficiently in your classes and are happy to meet with you one-on-one or with your entire department.

Changes to Note Taking

An example of our new approach can be seen in changes we are making to the Note Taking Services accommodation. In the past, peer note taking has been the main note taking accommodation for students with some disabilities. Using only one option for note taking assistance, however, has been limiting to many students.

To remedy this, we are using our interactive interviews with new students to determine which students would benefit from other ways to remove barriers they might face to recording and processing information in the classroom. On a case-by-case basis, we are assigning the following accommodations to some students to overcome those barriers

* Notetaking assistance – If instructor is using PowerPoint, slides should be provided to student in advance of class.
* Notetaking assistance – Student may use a laptop to take notes in class.
* Notetaking assistance – Student may audio record lectures with LiveScribe Smartpen after notifying instructor.
* Notetaking assistance – Student may type notes and audio record lectures with laptop, phone, or tablet after notifying instructor

Note that while these are listed as accommodations, they actually promote student independence. While we always encourage every student to take their own notes, some students are able to take notes completely independently when they have the framework of PowerPoint slides or an audio recording to bolster their work. And depending on how a course is designed, these accommodations may not require any change to how an instructor operates, eliminating the need for a student to self-disclose a disability.

There are students with some disabilities who will still require a peer note taker, so we are taking steps to improve this accommodation.

* We are training all note takers and giving them additional options for taking and transferring notes.
* We are reaching out to students with this accommodation mid-semester to ensure they are receiving quality notes.
* We are keeping records of note takers. In the future, these may be used to find note takers for some students at the outset of the semester rather than relying on the student and professor to recruit someone.

We welcome your feedback on how the College can most efficiently remove barriers to recording and processing information in the classroom. We understand that some faculty are concerned with the use of electronic technology in their classes and we also want to ensure that the intellectual property of faculty is protected. And we suspect that many are already implementing teaching strategies that help eliminate accessibility barriers. Please reach out to us with any questions, concerns, or ideas so we can speak with you and/or your department.

The Livescribe 3 Smartpen – A Review by Samantha Macrae

Editor’s Note: A handful of students have used Livescribe smartpens on campus in the past. This year, our office is loaning many more of these pens out to students, so you are more likely to see them in the classroom. Senior Samantha Macrae borrowed a pen from us this semester and has written this review.

The Livescribe 3 smartpen has a sleek black pen design that uses camera technology and Bluetooth to make digital copies of notes while also recording vocal audio. Notes are made easy to access on any compatible smartphone or tablet by using the Livescribe + Mobile App, where “pencasts” are saved and compiled. This allows users to gain access to notes taken in the Livescribe notebooks anywhere with a click of a button. Entries that are taken on the Livescribe Dot paper ensures that every mark the pen makes in its notebook is recorded accurately by using its ARM processor located near the tip on the pen.

The recording feature is extremely helpful in an academic lecture setting where vital information that is being given orally can be missed during the note taking process. While taking notes and recording audio, the pen has the capability to match up the words of a lecturer with the notes being written down during that exact time. This allows for users who revisit notes and still seem confused about the meaning behind what they wrote down during that time to better understand their notes by listening to the audio that was captured. This can easily be done by tapping on the sentence or word in the notebook while using the app to play back audio that was recorded. The audio is recorded on the tablet or tablet chosen by opening the application and clicking the recording setting.

While many of the features the pen has are enormously beneficial for those who struggle with note taking, there were some slight problems that could affect one’s experience using it. The recording feature, at times, would stop recording when the device locked and would not restart the recording process without unlocking the tablet/smartphone. If one is not careful and paying attention to the light indication on the pen, lectures can easily go unrecorded, however, it will still capture written notes. Another issue that could arise with a user is that neat or legible hand writing would be best for an individual to have since it copies the exact pen motions made on the paper. Those who struggle with handwriting or who often make mistakes may not like using the pen. Since it has to be used with ink, mistakes can overwhelm a page with scribbles and will show up in pencasts.

While there are some things that could be improved with the Livescribe pen, many of them are minor compared to the benefits that the pen offers. This pen would be very helpful to those who don’t mind writing in and with an ink pen as well as those who have trouble taking notes in a lecture setting where much of the information is given orally. It also allows for easy access from anywhere as long as one has a device with the app downloaded and linked. Being able to review notes along with the lecture audio that are synced up allows the individual to better understand the notes as well as give the ability to catch missed information. It is also made so it is easy to use and once one gets the hand of using it, very rarely will one find problems with operating the smartpen. If an individual has messy handwriting and doesn’t enjoy writing in pen due to the amount of mistakes they might make, this product probably wouldn’t be something that they would enjoy. Otherwise, the Livescribe pen is a very useful and helpful tool for students who don’t want to rely on a student note taker or one who has a hard time processing auditory and visual presentations at the same time. Depending on the individual and their note taking preference this is something that could be utilized in many different ways, providing accessible and reliable note taking assistance.

The Moment of Disclosure

Last month, our office hosted a panel of students and faculty offering some best practices for discussing a student’s accommodations letter. We recognize that these are sensitive conversations and we want to help faculty and students make the best of them.

For those who were unable to attend the event, the panel members have shared written responses to our questions. Thank you Dr. Susan Barnett, Assistant Professor of Recreation, Parks, and Leisure Studies, Dr. Maria Timberlake, Assistant Professor of Foundations and Social Advocacy, junior Skye Malik, and senior Samantha Macrae for sharing your wisdom and experiences. We would love to hear from others on how you approach these conversations.

Student Responses

1. What do you hope to accomplish when you meet with an instructor to discuss your accommodations letter?

Skye: I typically hope that my professors and I can work out a way for me to get my accommodations, which mostly is about where I will take my extended time for tests.

Sam: What I hope to accomplish when meeting with an instructor to discuss my accommodation letter is for them to get a clear understanding of my learning style. While my accommodations only give them a brief idea of how I learn, I try to give them idea of how I typically handle assignments as well as in class activities. For me this not only allows me to get an idea of how they have interacted and dealt with past students, but it also gives me a chance to differentiate myself from the other students.

1. How do you go about this meeting? How do you set it up, where do you try to meet, when in the semester do you do it, and what do you say to your instructor to open the meeting?

Skye: I do this in the beginning of the semester and try to have them done within the first week if possible. I will just approach my professor after class and tell them that I am dyslexic while handing them my accommodation letter. I then tell them that I mostly need the extended time.

Sam: In the past I have typically gone about these meeting before or after the class period has ended depending on the professor. If they are usually there well before class starts, I will start a conversation about my accommodations, otherwise I wait until class is over. If either time feels uncomfortable or rushed for myself or the professor, I will meet them during their office hours. I simply set it up by first introducing myself and stating that I have a learning disability and that I require accommodations. This usually leads into my going into detail about what my accommodations are or us setting up a time to talk during office hours.

1. What are some helpful things that instructors have said to you or asked you during this meeting?

Skye: Instructors have been helpful in sharing a positive attitude and telling me that they are willing to help me in any way they can. This is comforting to me as I get ready for the semester.

Sam: The most helpful thing that my instructors have said to me during my meetings is that they are happy and willing to accommodate me however I wish to go about it, either using their resources or going through the testing center. Helpful things that they have said to me include if they think my accommodation will be needed and/or helpful during their course. Many courses I take don't have written exams, but will have readings, so knowing that in advance will help me get a better sense of how I will move through the course and if it might be useful to use ASAP.

1. What would you like instructors to avoid doing in these meetings?

Skye: There is not much I can say about instructors avoiding doing something during these meetings. However, I know some students might not want to share their disability, so instructors should not pry or pass judgments.

Sam: For me personally, I am very open about my learning disability and feel confidence and open about discussing it so I have never really had an experience where I wasn't comfortable. However, I would say they should avoid acting passive about it because it still is what makes me the learner I am today which is a big part of my identity. So I would suggest that they should avoid making it seem very obsolete when talking about it to the class when going over the syllabus. When it is brought up in classes and the instructor rushes over it or doesn't give it the attention that it deserves, for me that is a sign that they haven't really dealt with disabilities and makes me rethink taking their course.

1. What advice do you have for your fellow students when they wish to disclose to an instructor?

Skye: I would tell students to be as open and honest to whatever level makes them comfortable. For me, that is outright sharing my disability, but for others, they might not wish to do that.

Sam: My advice would be to do what makes themselves comfortable. If they are like myself, comfortable with having that discussion in an open environment, then by all means don't hesitate to approach your instructor. If they are more reserved about that possibility of someone overhearing, then I would suggest emailing the professor separately and setting up a time to meet during their office hours. I would also remind them that they don't have to disclose any more information than what is on the letter if they don't feel comfortable with doing so. However, I would encourage sharing more because it may give your instructor a better sense of who they are as a learner, as well as allow you to start a positive relationship with the professor.

Faculty Responses

**A preface from Dr. Timberlake**: As an educator, I think of the moment of disclosure as one moment among MANY. The moment a student shares their accommodations letter with me is the culmination of hundreds of previous moments. Without knowing the student, I do know that previous moments may have included any or all of these: struggling in school, being evaluated, having an IEP, having teachers who did and did not honor the accommodations in K-12, feeling stigmatized, segregated, relieved, apprehensive, wondering whether college was an option, trying to go it alone (“I don’t need accommodations, I can do it”) asking for help, getting into college, deciding whether to tell professors or not….

These moments have all happened before the student comes up to me at the end of class, usually during the first week and hands me the letter.

1. What do you hope to accomplish when a student brings an accommodations letter to you?

Dr. Barnett: I believe the accommodations letter is a visual reminder to engage with my students in what the true holistic needs are for success in my classroom. Most of the time students preface the delivery with “I don’t think I will need this in your class,” which acknowledges the inclusive nature of my courses, but it still allows for an opportunity for me to ask for a separate meeting during student hours to discuss the student’s needs beyond the listing of pre-determined accommodations suggested by the Disability Resources Office. This means that I want to know within the course structure and classroom environment established on the first day of the semester how I can assist the student in advocating for all needs (social, emotional, physical, cognitive, etc.). I do not ask my student what their disability is, but rather focus on the strengths of both my course and their needs to establish more clarity.

Dr. Timberlake: I hope to assure the student that my class will be a welcoming comfortable place where learning is assumed to be variable and there is no stigma to learning “differently.” To communicate that the letter isn’t shocking or concerning and that there are many ways to learn and class will offer multiple options.

1. What do you say and ask the student to accomplish those goals?

Dr. Barnett: Depending on the timing and location of when my student approaches me, I like to make sure my student knows I appreciate them for handing me the letter. If there are others around, I ask if students can wait just a moment while I answer other student questions. If waiting is not possible, then I let the student know I will be in touch to discuss the letter. If disclosed in private, I thank my student for being an advocate for their own learning. I ask the student to schedule a time with me to walk through my course syllabus and schedule to discuss any potential needs the student may have beyond the accommodations. I reinforce to the student that they are in charge of their learning experiences, and if a specific approach or technique is thought of after the meeting to make sure and share it with me.

Dr. Timberlake: I ask the student to tell me a little about their previous schooling and what has helped them be successful. I also have an assignment in every class I teach that requires a personal learning profile- a little bit about how the students learn, past successes and challenges and what they know about their own best ways to learn. I have re-worded the requisite disability statement on my syllabi to sound more rights-based, i.e. “You have the right to receive accommodations….” instead of “If you have a disability and need accommodations…” which sounds more deficit-oriented.

1. What advice do you have for your fellow faculty when a student approaches them with an accommodations letter?

Dr. Barnett: Disclosing a need is a vulnerable process for a student. I believe it is important for faculty and staff to recognize that the student just did something they didn’t want to do or feel comfortable doing. Even if the student has handed that letter to dozens of professors so far, each interaction comes with the anticipation of how you might negatively react. Unfortunately, negative experiences reinforce the anxiety and fear of the next disclosure. Therefore, be open and accepting of the student’s efforts to take control of their own learning.

Dr. Timberlake: That the need for accommodations is legitimate. It isn’t a “special” privilege for students that gives them an advantage. If the accommodations letter means “more work for you” then it’s time to look at your instruction anyway ☺ Often, the things that help students with learning or other disabilities, such as guided notes, posting slides ahead of time, allowing a student to re-listen to a lecture, helps all students obtain the content more successfully.

Secondly, to be aware that students may have experienced many painful interactions before the “moment” you are experiencing with them and choose your reaction carefully.

For example, my niece has a learning disability but mostly chooses not to disclose because she has had peers say “I don’t hang out with speds”. She has had friends start talking more slowly and simply as though she doesn’t understand them and she has had teachers offer “help” that doesn’t empower her but assumes she is (in her words) “stupid”. After bringing up her dyslexia, one professor told her, “the article is online, you can read it as many times as you need to”. However, when print is difficult, reading it 100 times doesn’t matter, so an offer of help like that is actually dismissive of her disability.

Thirdly, related to what I said above, faculty may not realize that to arrive at the point of having a letter and legally receiving accommodations, students have likely been through a system (special education) that, although well-intentioned, has defined a standard of “normal”. And the student in front of you has had to be defined as “abnormal” in some way in order to receive accommodations. This isn’t a neutral process and for many students I know, goes hand in hand with anxiety.

1. What advice do you have for students when they wish to disclose to an instructor?

Dr. Barnett: Use your accommodations letter as a tool for advocacy. Since you know more about what you need, it is important for you to use the letter as a way to have a conversation with your professors and instructors about it. You don’t have to disclose what your disability may be, but rather how you best learn. If you are unaware of how you best learn, use the accommodations letter and subsequent conversations to start exploring what those specific needs may be. And, don’t be discouraged by the poor interactions, each of us are human beings continuously learning how to interact with others.

Dr. Timberlake: You have to learn to be a self-advocate because no one knows you as well as you know yourself. We live in a world with lots of popular misperceptions about disability (people feel sorry for individuals with obvious physical impairments, or they feel “inspired” by the accomplishments of a disabled person living their life, or disability is mocked (“retard,” “sped” ) etc. Understand that you are smart and that instruction in schools isn’t always aligned with how you learn. That’s not your fault!

Maybe someday we’ll flip it around and all instructors will present a list of accommodations to the whole class and say “everyone check off the ones that would help you” and then plan accordingly!

But in the meantime, talk to your professor early in the semester and make an appointment so you aren’t standing with a bunch of people at the end of class waiting to show your letter.