From Assessment to Action: Identifying Progress Toward Enhanced Accessibility and Campus Climate (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

In 2013, a focus group of administrators, faculty, staff, and students at Skidmore College was held to discuss cross-campus changes implemented following the Assessment of Campus Climate to Enhance Student Success survey and an external disability services audit, which were conducted during the 2008-2009 academic year. The focus group gave these campus constituents an opportunity to both gauge progress and identify areas of continuing need in serving the college's students with disabilities. The participants identified changes in policies, procedures, and services, and in the level of awareness and attention given to the needs of students with disabilities at the departmental and institutional levels. This practice brief describes the implementation of this focus group and reviews cross-campus initiatives implemented between 2009 and 2013, as identified by the respondents. Three themes emerged from the focus group responses: enhanced communication and coordination, increased awareness and receptivity, and areas needing further development.

Keywords: *Campus climate, disability services, focus group, college students with disabilities*

Literature Review

As of 2009, approximately 11% of all students enrolled at U.S. postsecondary education institutions reported having a disability (Korbel, Lucia, Wenzel, & Anderson, 2011; Snyder & Dillow, 2013). While legal mandates such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act have increased access to postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities, access alone cannot guarantee that these students will be afforded full participation or inclusion in the campus environment (Belch, 2011; Meade, 2006). As the need for individualized support continues to increase beyond accommodations in the classroom, providing support for students with disabilities has become an imperative responsibility for departments other than college disability services offices (Huger, 2011). Thus it is essential to coordinate institutional efforts to establish effective support services. This requires faculty, administrators, and staff to go beyond mere compliance with legal mandates to foster a welcoming campus climate (Korbel et al., 2011; Simon, 2011). Campus climate refers to individuals with disabilities' attitudes toward and perceptions of the campus environment, including their evaluation of the institution's support systems and resources, educational and social practices, and the physical environment (Cress, 2008; Huger, 2011).

To establish a welcoming campus climate for students with both documented and undocumented disabilities, university leaders must evaluate the accessibility of their institution's physical, social, organizational, and technological systems and structures (Strange, 2000). Campus climate assessments are one way to evaluate an institution's current effectiveness in meeting the needs of the entire campus population, and the results may provide a catalyst for developing more informed practices and new student support ini-

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tiatives (Stodden, Brown, & Roberts, 2011). However, while it is common practice among higher education institutions to conduct campus climate assessments, there is limited evidence on how the data from these assessments have been used to implement changes in services, policies, and procedures for students with disabilities. This practice brief provides an overview of the progress Skidmore College has made in implementing the recommendations that emerged from disability services and campus climate assessments, specifically those identified and discussed by campus constituencies in a focus group.

Background of Campus Climate and Disability Services Assessment Implementation

With the support of senior administrative leadership, Skidmore College, a small, highly selective liberal arts college in Upstate New York, contracted with the Association on Higher Education and Disability in fall 2008 to conduct the Assessment of Campus Climate to Enhance Student Success (ACCESS) in order to gain a better understanding of the campus climate (see Eilola et al., 2011, for a complete discussion of this process). Recommendations resulting from the ACCESS survey included a need for greater awareness across the campus about the needs of students with disabilities and the accommodations process, stronger relationships between faculty and the school's Office of Disability Services, and the establishment of an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) advisory board to implement accessibility initiatives (Eilola et al., 2011). Skidmore College concurrently contracted with an external consultant to audit its disability services program, which was done from October 2008 to March 2009. The audit recommendations included creating an ADA advisory group to implement accessibility and educational initiatives, adopting a formal disability services model, and identifying methods to increase the accessibility of programs and services by making information about the accommodations process more available to the public. These concurrent initiatives prompted conversations across campus departments and facilitated plans to create an enhanced campus experience for students with disabilities.

Discussion of the Problem

In spring 2013, members of the ADA advisory group decided to assess progress made toward satisfying the recommendations from the 2008-2009 audit and survey in terms of policies, procedures, services, and overall awareness within individual departments and across the campus. The purpose in gathering data more than four years after implementing the two initial initiatives was to formally recognize progress made in implementing the recommendations, promote conversation across constituencies about disability and accessibility, and detect areas of continued need in serving the college's students with disabilities. If the school failed to assess progress and plan future initiatives, the needs of its students with disabilities could go unmet, an issue the ADA advisory group continually works to eradicate.

Strategy for Enrolling Students with Disabilities

Since 2008, the number of students with disabilities enrolled at Skidmore College who registered to receive academic accommodations has steadily increased (Table 1). For example, the number of students who took exams with extended time allowed or in the college's testing room with reduced distractions more than tripled from fall 2009 to fall 2012 (Table 2). The majority of students who registered as having documented disabilities identified themselves as having a learning disability, ADD, or ADHD.

In 2013, members of the college's ADA advisory group decided to conduct a focus group to elicit feedback from school administrators, faculty, staff, and students on progress made toward creating a more inclusive environment for students with disabilities since the 2008-2009 assessments. The administrators selected this over alternative data-collection methods as it enabled campus constituencies to have thoughtful conversations around disability and accessibility issues on campus, in accordance with the ADA advisory group's mission. Administrators from academic advising, academic affairs, residential life, special programs, campus life, the counseling center, student academic services, institutional technology, and library services were invited via e-mail to participate. Those invited to participate were selected based on their involvement in campus services related to ADA concerns. Current students with and without disabilities who had been attending Skidmore College since 2009 were also contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in individual interviews, which asked the same focus group questions but within a confidential environment.

Before starting, participants were given a verbal and written overview of the background, procedures, risks and benefits, confidentiality, and voluntary nature of the focus group. All participants signed an informed consent form to acknowledge their understanding and agreement with the procedures. Each question was then posed (see Appendix), and participants were given time

for open discussion on each topic. The focus group process was documented using an audio-recording device. When the focus group ended, the recording was reviewed and analyzed to identify unique areas of progress and overarching themes in the participants' responses. This involved examining the data in each domain of inquiry (i.e., each interview question) to identify emergent themes across the individual responses. These themes were then reviewed to ensure that they appropriately represented what the interviewees expressed in each domain of inquiry.

Observed Outcomes

Ten individuals representing the areas of academic advising, academic affairs, residential life, special programs, campus life, the counseling center, student academic services, institutional technology, and library services, and one student, participated in the focus group. Three students (two with disabilities and one without) and two administrators (one from academic affairs and one from human resources) who were unable to attend the focus group participated in individual interviews, which were conducted using the focus group questions, as explained above. Three themes emerged from the focus groups and interviews (see Table 3 for quotes corresponding with each theme). These themes included enhanced communication and coordination between and within campus constituencies; increased awareness and receptivity to inclusion and the accommodations process; and the need for more development to create a fully inclusive, accessible campus environment.

Enhanced Communication and Coordination

The ADA advisory group established in 2011 was comprised of administrators, faculty, staff, and students, upon the recommendation of both the ACCESS survey implementation team and the external auditor. The committee's aim was to improve cross-campus communication, address issues of access and ADA compliance, and plan and execute initiatives to improve inclusion and access across the campus. The group chose a shared model of disability services provision, in which responsibility for providing services is distributed among faculty, administrators, and staff. Communication between the Coordinator of Student Access Services (formerly titled coordinator for students with disabilities), the offices of admissions, special programs, and residential life, and the counseling center became more intentional, which resulted in seamless student referrals to the appropriate departments. Anna,* an administrator participant,

noted that the student housing accommodations process had been streamlined when this task was reassigned to the Coordinator of Student Access Services.

The curriculum committee instituted a requirement for faculty to include an academic accommodations statement on all course syllabi. When they registered with the Coordinator of Student Access Services, these statements informed students what course-related accommodations were available. The Office of Academic Advising and the Coordinator of Student Access Services jointly implemented faculty training on how student academic services operated, with an emphasis on serving students with disabilities. They also implemented a training session for new faculty hires on coordinating the delivery of accommodations. New student employees also received training through the Office of Residential Life about the inclusive programming offered in the residence halls. This training was given by administrator respondent Anna and included an explanation of the accommodations statements provided on program flyers. Application materials for special programs and study abroad opportunities were also updated to include information about what accommodation supports were available and the process for requesting them. Student respondent Jane* stated that adding accommodation information to the study abroad application had made coordinating and receiving academic accommodations at an institution abroad a straightforward process.

Physical enhancements to the campus had also been undertaken following the assessments conducted in 2009. A testing room was established by student academic services in 2009, which improved the college's ability to provide appropriate testing accommodations. Faculty respondent Mark* noted that the Office of Student Academic Services saw a steady increase in the number of students who took exams with extended time and/or reduced distractions after the testing room was established, although a relationship between the testing room and the increase in test accommodations used cannot be confirmed without further evaluation (Table 1). Walkways, doorways, and bathroom facilities across the campus were also renovated to improve physical accessibility.

Increased Awareness and Receptivity to Inclusion and the Accommodations Process

The focus group participants noted that an increase in deliberate coordination and communication among the college departments generated greater awareness and receptivity to the need for inclusive practices across the campus. They also said they sensed that the administration had more fully embraced an ethos of

ADA compliance. While additional evaluation would have to be conducted to confirm their responses, the respondents all said they felt a shift on campus toward increased awareness and receptivity relative to the increased coordination of services since the college had started to implement the various initiatives in 2009.

The respondents perceived that employees and students had become better self-advocates and were able to articulate their needs early in the employment process or when registering with the Coordinator of Student Access Services, respectively. According to administrator respondents Mark* and Alyssa,* external factors contributing to the positive changes may have included the evolution of the ADA, high schools' preparation of students with disabilities for the college experience, and more students coming from regions where protection under ADA standards is strictly enforced. Administrators also mentioned recognizing changes in their own attitudes when making accommodation requests on behalf of students, in particular a shift away from an apologetic tone to one of ease.

Need for Future Development for an Inclusive, Accessible Campus Environment

The respondents recognized that all campus constituencies needed additional training. Increased staff training and continued faculty development were considered crucial, as administrator respondent Alyssa noted, especially in methods for effectively meeting the needs of students with particular disabilities. Alyssa also suggested that faculty, administration, staff, and students could benefit from knowing which disabilities were represented on campus in order to provide support for those individuals' unique needs. The Office of Residential Life is currently contemplating offering student leader trainings on using inclusive and "person-first" language. Student respondent Mary* recommended offering more opportunities for all campus community members to participate in dialogues on disability. The student respondents also felt that creating a group specifically for students with disabilities and their allies to discuss needs, challenges, and avenues for social change could be a powerful and supportive resource.

Plans to continue plant renovations are in progress, such as hiring a consultant to evaluate the campus and recommend improvements. The Institutional Technology Office discussed plans to provide a campus accessibility map on the college website, which would enable individuals to identify accessible pathways before visiting the campus, and Academic Affairs expressed interest in providing a resource guide of best practices on the website to support students with disabilities.

Increased coordination and visibility have created workload issues for the Office of Student Access Services located within Student Academic Services. The responsibilities of the of Student Access Services have grown considerably in recent years, and additional growth is expected as the needs and number of students with disabilities continue to increase. Additional staffing may be needed to support the Office of Student Access Services. The work of the ADA advisory group will continue to be crucial for planning and effecting change, and the respondents agreed that making the committee better known across campus would benefit its mission and vision.

Implications

The focus group and individual interview participants identified campuswide changes that not only were concrete (e.g., physical and procedural changes) but also could be sensed in the institution's climate. The ACCESS survey and external audit were productive steps that helped campus constituents solidify plans to create greater awareness and enhance accessibility. Ultimately, efforts to change the campus climate since conducting the ACCESS survey and audit were made possible by the attention and efforts of the institution's dedicated faculty, administrators, and staff. Employees of Skidmore College collectively implemented several of the recommendations identified by the assessment and audit, such as establishing an ADA advisory group, holding faculty and student trainings to increase awareness of the needs of students with disabilities and the accommodations process, including an accommodations statement on course syllabi and application documents, adopting a formal disability services model in the selection of a shared model, and increasing cooperation between the Coordinator of Student Access Services and various other departments.

The limitations of this brief include potential personal bias in the participants' responses and possible inhibition about disclosing their observations in a public forum. Participants' responses can only be considered representative of a subset of individuals, not of the entire campus community. The focus group process could be improved by holding multiple sessions to increase the number of respondents and concurrently implementing a quantitative assessment to offer campus constituents multiple ways to report their observations. Moreover, inviting all individuals on campus to participate, rather than targeting select departments, would allow for a wider range of perspectives and greater representation of the entire campus. Despite their limitations, focus groups are a valuable

way of allowing campus constituents who have an interest and stake in meeting the needs of students with disabilities to collectively recognize progress and identify areas where future development is needed. Focus groups can also be reproduced at other institutions, given adequate backing from campus leaders.

Looking ahead, it will be important to provide more training for faculty, staff, and administrators on the principles and implementation of universal design. As "flipped" classrooms (i.e., those where faculty give students class time to apply active learning techniques rather than relying completely on lecturing) become more common, helping faculty adapt their materials to meet universal design standards will become even more necessary. Having a better understanding of faculty needs in this area will inform this work. Finally, assessment of the campus climate using both qualitative and quantitative measures should continue, and those outcomes should be used to improve services and enhance inclusion as part of the ADA advisory group's charge.

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Authors' Note

Table 1

Number of Students Registered with Student Access Services

Year	Number of Students
2005-2006	126
2006-2007	131
2007-2008	145
2008-2009	173
2009-2010	197
2010-2011	210
2011-2012	231
2012-2013	234

Table 2

Testing Room Use Since Established

Academic Term	Number of Exams Given
2009-2010	124
2010-2011	208
2011-2012	317
2012-2013	350
2013-2014	590

Table 3

Themes and Illustrative Quotes

Theme	Response	Respondent
1. Enhanced Communication and Coordination	"This past June, we shifted the chair of the [housing accommodations] process to the [Coordinator of Student Access Services position]… Streamlining that process has made it easier for students to engage with the person who is the expert in that area. I think for family, many students who are seeking housing accommodations are also seeking classroom accommodations, so having that in one place has really helped."	Administrator, Anna*
	"Overall I feel the shift from 2008 or prior...We really feel like we have an advocate and someone we could go to with questions that we previously didn't have."	Admistrator, Rita*
	"Ever since I was a freshman, they had the [testing] room in Student Academic Services…I like the fact that there is a physical location for support."	Student, Jane*
	"At the beginning of class, professors will bring up if you have any disability needs or concerns, please come talk to me, and they put it on the syllabus."	Student, Mary*
2. Increased Awareness and Receptivity to Inclusion and the Accommodations Process	"Students used to come up to faculty the day of the exam… but because of the work you are doing with students early on, that is being reduced. With the statement in the syllabi and students being aware and understanding their responsibilities, that has changed a lot."	Faculty, Leslie*
	"The other [change] in the area of Academic Affairs along with faculty has been the increase in the ADA statement on syllabi, and the work that has been done by the Curriculum Committee to encourage all faculty to include that on all of their syllabi."	Faculty, Mark*
	"I'm not apologizing when I come with requests…We have a lot of students in the summer with diet restrictions. If we do need an accommodation, it's not a problem…Everybody's attitude really seems more supportive."	Administrator, Anna*
	"I definitely think there is a change from freshman year…Going to professors, I didn't feel really stigmatized at all for it…it's something I need and I felt like they understood."	Student, Jane*
	"Once the testing room was established, we saw slow but steady increase in the use of that testing room from students and faculty."	Administrator, Mark*

(Table 3, continued)

3. Needs for Future Development for an Inclusive, Accessible Campus Environment	"If there was some outlet...for people who would like to talk about their experiences…if they want to share. I feel like that would have been helpful for me early on."	Student, Mary*
	"I still think there is some confusion around how to work with students with particular disabilities…Some targeted work with faculty and staff around those issues would be really important."	Administrator, Alyssa*
	"One concern that I have…there is only one person in this position [of Coordinator for Student Access Services]…and we need to continue to look at staffing and support in this area."	Faculty, Marla*
	"I don't think that the campus community is fully aware the ADA committee exists and what it's working on…As a part of the awareness effort, it could include the committee itself."	Administrator, Mark*

Appendix

Focus Group and Interview Discussion Questions

1. In what ways have policy, procedures, and/or services in your department/area changed relative to the inclusion of students with disabilities or sensitivity to ADA compliance standards since the Assessment of Campus Climate to Enhance Student Success (ACCESS) survey that was conducted in fall 2008?

2. If applicable, in what ways have you recognized an increase in overall awareness of students with disabilities and access issues among administration, staff, faculty, and students since ACCESS was conducted?

3. In what way(s) do you feel your area and the overall campus need to further progress in regard to inclusiveness and accessibility?