

Rutgers University Senate Student Affairs Committee

Response to Charge S-0910, Accessibility of Student Services

April 2010

Charge S-0910, Accessibility of Student Services: Examine the function of disability services support to determine the adequacy of resource allocation and awareness. This includes the review of the adequacy of physical resources, the availability of funds for outside services and required accommodation equipment and tools, and sources for increases in professional and support personnel. Recommend best practices to be implemented which would allow for the effective dissemination of information to faculty and staff to promote awareness so they may be a part of the solution towards providing accommodations and supporting this unique population of students.

Background: This charge originated from discussions between Senators Nathan Levinson and Samuel Rabinowitz centering around the need to review disability services given the needs of our student base. This report represents a snapshot of some of the areas in need of current and future attention.

Data Collection: Individuals interviewed during the course of researching this charge included:

- Gregory Moorehead, Director- Office of Disability Services (ODS)
- Clarence Shive, Assistant Director/Coordinator for Physical and Psychiatric Concerns-ODS
- Kathy Lodor-Murphy, Coordinator for Traumatic Brain Injuries; Attentional/Learning Disabilities-ODS
- Donald Heilman, Associate Dean of Students: Compliance and Assessment
- Nathan Levinson, Disability Coordinator, Camden Campus
- Kathleen Scott, Assistant Vice President of Instructional Support

Overview of Disability-Related Issues:

Rutgers University has a stated commitment to dealing with diversity. We often think of diversity in terms of race and gender, but disability is also one of its dimensions. Rutgers also has a stated need to increase enrollments and retain students in order to generate further revenues given the decreasing amount of state aid over the last decade. With this in mind, a brief look at numbers will paint part of the picture.

The Office of Disability Services (ODS), in the Fall 2009 semester, serviced over 1,200 students on all campuses, which is double the number serviced four years ago. It did this with a staff of three professional and three administrative support staff based in a small part of the Kreeger Learning Center. Only one person each on the Newark and Camden campuses provides some additional help as a part of their respective jobs.

In an unofficial poll of similar-sized AAU institutions with an average enrollment of 35,884, the average ODS staff size was 11.7, the average number of students registered with the office was 984, and the average ratio of students to staff was 84:1. The Rutgers ODS staff members have caseloads in the 250-400 range. We add to this picture a conclusion presented in an October 2009 United States Government Accountability Office report (GAO-10-33) entitled "Higher Education and Disability: Education Needs a Coordinated Approach to Improve its Assistance to Schools in Supporting Students," which noted that students with disabilities represented nearly 11 percent of all postsecondary students in 2008.

Given that Rutgers University now has more than 50,000 students, it is conceivable that the 1,200 students serviced could more than quadruple in number with requests for needs-based services and accommodations. It is essential that Rutgers be prepared for this by educating our faculty and staff, and being proactive in approaching the needs of this population, as well as allocating additional space resources, and addressing the legal and human-resource implications.

This report and its recommendations are intended to offer suggestions which should be considered in both the short and long term. We recognize that the current financial situation presents challenges which must be factored into any decisions, but believe it is necessary to create awareness of possible actions which could be taken to improve this important function. Fortunately, we have a very dedicated group of disability services providers to work with in this endeavor. We met with these individuals (listed above) between October 2009 and March 2010.

Recommendations/Rationale:

1. **Create a university-level Disability Services Advisory Board.** The Director of the Office of Disability Services would make a logical chair of this committee, and its membership should include faculty, staff, and students from all campuses. Campus committees should also be created in both Newark and Camden with similar representation of individuals with interests in this area. The prime purposes would be to develop a strategic plan, and to periodically review actions taken to address needs of the disabled population. It is also important to have Disability Services represented on any committees dealing with building design and renovation given the need to address accessibility issues per federal law.

While the creation of committees to focus on disability issues would be beneficial as we move forward, the Student Affairs Committee saw the need to highlight the following as areas to be addressed.

2. **Increase Awareness.** There is a compelling need to create avenues for expanding institutional and individual awareness about the needs of the disability-related population. To this end, we recommend:

a. *Create training opportunities:* Faculty, staff, and students all share the responsibility of making Rutgers the best possible learning environment. Working with Human Resources, the Office of Disability Services should create workshops, online tutorials, and certificate programs which would increase awareness of the needs of those with disabilities. The support of the administration in promoting these training opportunities and providing time for individuals who deal directly with the disability-related population (e.g., department secretaries, faculty, etc.) to participate in the training is essential.

b. *Distribute information at orientation:* As new people enter the university, either as employees or as students, there should be information readily available to sensitize them to the area of disabilities specific to students. Such information could be placed in an orientation packet and would include, but not be limited to, how to recognize signs of disabilities, a referral list of appropriate people and places around the university for seeking services, accessible classrooms and work areas, etc.

Our faculty, in particular, can help in a number of ways in dealing with students with disabilities. These include, but are not limited to:

3. **Make syllabi available as soon as possible before the beginning of the semester.** Some students need accommodations such as translating text into CD or other computer-read media, and

arranging for interpreters and/or notetakers for deaf students (as just two examples). With advance notice, the Office of Disability Services could have alternate-form learning materials ready earlier in the semester so students who need them would have timely access.

4. **Provide a statement on the course syllabus indicating that students in need of classroom accommodations should contact the Disability Services coordinator on their campus in order to make such arrangements.** The Office of Disability Services can assist anyone needing help wording the statement.

5. **Apply the principles of Universal Design for Learning to the way courses are taught.** The Universal Design for Learning's principles are aimed at meeting the needs of diverse learning styles and differing abilities/disabilities. The Office of Disability Services can provide further information on this approach.

Given the above considerations, some students will need of the evaluation and testing services provided by the Office of Disability Services. To this end, the following needs to be considered and addressed:

6. **Identify dedicated, distraction-free space across all campuses for counseling and testing students with disabilities.** Currently, on the College Avenue Campus, Disability Services shares space within the Kreeger Learning Center. This space and situation are inadequate to meet the needs of the students, especially during prime testing times. Other campuses have similar dedicated-space needs. Ideally, testing centers should be created on the New Brunswick, Camden, and Newark campuses. This, of course, is costly and is a longer term consideration, but with benefits that also go beyond serving only the needs of this part of the population (e.g., make-up exams could be administered in this center). In the interim, creative identification of times when particular quiet locations could be designated for testing purposes can be done in collaboration with campus scheduling officers.

7. **Address the staffing needs for providing disability services.** Currently, the disability services staff's caseloads are high and extremely challenging. On the Newark and Camden campuses, single individuals deal with trying to meet the needs of disabled students as a part of their overall responsibilities. Dedicated individuals are needed in light of the expected growth of demands in the years ahead. While it may be hard to hire additional full-time personnel given the current budgetary limitations, we suggest consideration be given to employing trained students (e.g., graduate assistants, interns) to staff testing areas and provide academic coaching to students with disabilities, which would enable full-time staffers to focus on other disability-related needs.

8. **Provide IT consultation or staff to the Office of Disability Services.** The area of adaptive technology for those with disabilities is continually changing. The Office of Disability Services should be given access to an IT consultant or staff person to help it keep up with current advances in adaptive technology.

9. **Design and implement a transition program.** Working with Career Services on each campus, the Office of Disability Services should design and implement a transition program to assist students with disabilities as they prepare to leave Rutgers for growth opportunities (e.g., career, graduate school, etc.).

Conclusions:

In 2009, the Office of Disability Services conducted a university-wide survey designed by the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD). The predominant theme among the over 2,000 respondents was that there is insufficient awareness and training regarding the needs of

individuals with disabilities in our community. On April 15, 2010, Rutgers' Office of Disability Services presented a Disability Awareness Conference on the Busch Campus. Currently, efforts are being made to increase the presence of disability services on the Livingston campus. Acknowledging the importance of these beginning steps and considering the recommendations in this report should put Rutgers in a position to be a leader in providing services that help maximize the potential and academic success of students with disabilities.

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