

Statement of Katherine Myers

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“Promoting College Access and Success for Students with Disabilities”

U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

February 27, 2014

At Wright State University, we provide services to approximately 650 students with disabilities. Nationally, roughly 11% of college students have disabilities and 6% request services. Much like other college or university campuses, the fastest growing group of students with disabilities is those students on the Autism spectrum and those with mental health related diagnoses. For our students on the Autism spectrum, we have developed an academic coaching program. We hire upper-level undergraduate and graduate students to be mentors; we train them how to work with a student on the spectrum, and assign them to new incoming students who need improvement in key skill areas. The students can meet with their assigned mentor up to ten hours per week, working on “soft skills,” such as time management and organization. They might also work on establishing relationships with professors and roommates, as well as forging new friendships. We are planning to expand this program in the future to include students with mental health related disabilities.

Other services we have available to eligible Wright State University students registered with our office include: test proctoring (which includes extended time), private testing rooms, computers, speech-to-text software, screen reading software, screen enlargement software, document cameras (for enlarging paper exams or handwritten notes), scribes, readers, four-function calculators, in-class assistance, and copies of notes from peers in the classrooms. We have a comprehensive Technology Center for the production of textbooks and other printed class materials in alternative formats. These formats include audio CDs or MP3 files, text files for the students to use with their screen reading software, enlargeable PDF files for students with physical disabilities or those with visual impairments, Braille (including math Braille [Nemeth code], computer Braille, contracted Braille, foreign language Braille, and music Braille), and raised line image enhancement.

The Office of Disability Services is not the only location on campus providing services to students with disabilities. The Biology Department has an adaptive biology lab for students who need extra assistance completing their labs. Campus Recreation is in charge of the adapted recreation program, which includes adapted skiing and bowling, and wheelchair basketball. There is a National Science Foundation grant directed by a research professor; the program is designed to encourage students with disabilities to go into the STEM fields. This program includes an Ability Advisor, who works one-on-one with the students in STEM majors, professional mentoring, as well as its own Choose Ohio First Scholarship.

Recommendations:

Firstly, when it comes to working with students on the Autism spectrum and those with mental health disabilities, we do not have all of the answers. We need technical assistance in what accommodations and supports are appropriate, both academically and socially. With that kind of assistance, we would be better prepared to help these students to be successful in obtaining their college degrees.

Additionally, although our Technology Center utilizes a textbook clearinghouse called AccessText for the majority of our books needing an alternative format, this service only provides titles for approximately 60% of our textbooks. Students who purchase electronic books from publishers or the bookstore usually cannot get them to work with their text-to-speech or screen reading software because of the graphic nature of the books. Disability Service providers really need the publishers to be pushed to provide accessible electronic books. I would encourage the committee to review the Department of Education's AIM (Accessible Instructional Materials) Commission's report and print access issues in Higher Education.

There also needs to be a greater push for Universal Design for Instruction that would include funding to train faculty on different teaching methods that would create accessible course content for all students. If courses are planned & designed to be accessible, it would reduce the amount of work needed to provide our students with the basic necessities for their courses. Instructors are increasingly utilizing, if not completely relying on web based communications. The Department of Justice is currently engaged in rule making focused on accessible web design and I encourage that those regulations be given a priority. Lastly, there is a dearth of data on college students with disabilities. I would recommend that tracking the number of students with disabilities being served be included in the IPEDS Census.

