**Metro State’s Center for Accessibility Resources: A Learning Aid**

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One of Metropolitan State’s goals is a rich and varied diversity. There is an example of this diverseness that, all too often, gets overlooked. That being students with a disability. Some students have obvious physical impairments. Others have mental challenges that may not be as noticeable, but are challenges nonetheless. Still others might have a combination of both.

Whatever challenge life has handed them, all these students want is a fair chance, an equal opportunity to get the most out of their educational experience. A big, and much needed, step toward fulfilling this was the Rehabilitation Act of 1973—more specifically, Section 504.

This legislation, in part, stated that no one can be subjected to discrimination for having a disability. This included a number of major life activities, including caring for one’s self, walking, seeing, hearing . . . and learning. In other words, the day-to-day living that is everyone’s right. Expanding on the Rehabilitation Act, the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) applied standards to private sector businesses and also sought to eliminate barriers to disabled access in buildings, transportation and communication.

Section 504 was also the first national civil rights legislation that provided equal access for students with disabilities to higher education institutions. Long overdue, this required these institutions to make their programs accessible to qualified students with disabilities and to provide them with the needed accommodations for learning. At Metro State that need is filled by the Center for Accessibility Resources (CAR), providing a variety of tools and services for students with differing levels of need.

Regarding the changes that were brought about by the ADA and Rehabilitation Act, Director of the Center for Accessibility Resources Kristin Jorenby says, “It’s changed things a lot and, at the same time, a lot of things haven’t changed,” to which she adds, “It’s starting to change how people are perceived in a lot of ways. What hasn’t changed is that society still subscribes to what we refer to as the ‘medical model,’ in that disability is a detriment that needs to be corrected or fixed rather than just a difference. So there is still that stigma.”

Perhaps another proper perspective on seeing this is in the CAR section on Metro State’s website. It states that one of the school’s responsibilities is to “evaluate students and prospective students on their abilities and not their disabilities.” By going to the “Current Students” page of the school website, then clicking on the “Student Services” tab, all of the CAR’s information can be found in the blue left-hand column under “Center for Accessibility Resources.” The CAR can also be contacted by phone at 651-793-1549 (Voice) and 651-772-7723 (TTY), or by email at [accessibility.resources@metrostate.edu](mailto:accessibility.resources@metrostate.edu).

According to Jorenby, the ADA defines a disability as “an impairment that significantly impacts one or more major daily activities.” The CAR works with people that have one or multiple impairments, both physical and mental. This includes veterans who might have physical injuries, brain injuries or post-traumatic stress disorder. The evaluations the CAR performs are specific to each student’s needs. As Jorenby puts it, “I could have 10 people in the room who all have the same medical diagnosis but they’re all impacted in different ways, so they all have their own individualized plan for accommodation.”

Some students come to Metro State with ADA certification—or from another licensed professional—to receive accommodations for learning. But this is not a necessity to receive assistance, as the CAR will perform the needed evaluations and assessments for students to take advantage of their services. “Our services are not contingent on whether or not someone has been certified by Social Security or some other entity.” Jorenby said, “A lot of our students are, but that’s not a ‘make it or break it’ for us.”

Some students are also wary of using the CAR’s services, fearing that this will follow them once their schooling is done. Jorenby wants to assure students that the CAR’s records are strictly confidential and are not part of other records, such as transcripts. “What you share with us is completely confidential and we keep all of it separate, and no one is ever going to see it unless you give us explicit permission to share that information with that individual.” Jorenby said.

The CAR offers a number of “assistive technology” tools and “auxiliary aids.” Some of the more common ones used are screen readers—a tool that converts computer text to audio—and digital recorders for such things as lectures. Another device is called Livescribe or Smartpen. This crazy cool tool records an audio version of the lecture while also taking pictures of whatever notes the user is writing.

A newer tool available is called Sonocent, an audio note-taker that works much like a Smartpen. The difference being that students can use them with a smartphone, laptop or tablet. The software allows one to highlight as it records the lecture, and also has uploading capabilities if an instructor uses something like PowerPoint.

While this technology can open doors for some, for others who can’t access or manipulate the technology, it becomes a barrier. As an example, the Sonocent tool—an audio recording—does no good for a deaf student. There are ways around this with Sonocent, but it’s a complicated and time-consuming process. This is where a peer note-taker is invaluable, which is a classmate who volunteers their time to share their notes taken in class. In return they get 50 hours of community service.

One thing that the CAR does not accommodate for is language barriers. If someone that English is a second language happens to have a co-occurring disability along with it, then the CAR would accommodate strictly for that disability. “We make a very distinct separation, and we do not serve people solely on language barriers, because that is not a disability.” Jorenby said, “We would refer them to other resources to help with the language barrier.”

The one exception that Jorenby points out has to do with Metro State’s deaf students. Even though the majority of the deaf community considers it a language barrier, deafness is considered a disability.

Whatever tools or services are utilized through the CAR, students are encouraged to act early to have them in place before their semester starts. Because some of these accommodations can take up to six weeks to be available. “Instructors are not obligated to provide that accommodation retroactively,” Jorenby said.

Moreover, students entering higher-educational schools should also be aware that the burden (including financial) is now on them to acquire these accommodations. Whereas at the K-12 level these services might have been provided, part of the ADA and Rehabilitation Act requires the individual at the post-secondary level to be responsible for the needed accommodations. This is a new thing for some students, and for others their disability itself is something new.

The CAR has adjusted to this, offering to loan—through the library—certain tools so students can see if a particular aid works for them. If so, students can then purchase one. If not, then at least they didn’t waste their money.

Another adjustment the CAR has made is their name. Previously called Disability Services, about a year ago the name was changed to the Center for Accessibility Resources, for various reasons. One being that national trends were steering away from the term “disability.” Moreover, the CAR office did their own survey of Metro State staff, faculty and students. The results showed that many people did not identify with “disability.” This helped Jorenby and her staff realize that part of the reason they didn’t see as many students come in to use their services as they expected had to do with their name.

“If you don’t identify with having a disability, why would you go to an office that says they’re about disability,” Jorenby said, seeing that CAR is much more than that. “It’s really about universal design,” she said, “We have it in our mission statement here at Metro State that we are going to be an accessible university, so we want to make sure that everybody has access to this wonderful learning place. It’s all about creating that level playing field.”