Disability Services for Students

Self-Study Report

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ABSTRACT
Disability Services for Students performed a self-study to evaluate comprehensively the operation of the office using the national program standards of the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), the professional membership organization for disability services in higher education. Disability Services’ compliance percentile for meeting the standards ranged from 73 percent to 100 percent. The results show that the unit largely meets the AHEAD program standards, with the only exceptions occurring in relation to those standards with which Disability Services disagrees. The office will proceed to the next phase of this study by completing an external evaluation before the end of spring semester 2010.

BACKGROUND
AHEAD’s program standards guide disability services offices to identify strengths and weaknesses of their programs and to develop and improve the services they offer. Disability Services chose to use AHEAD’s program standards rather than those of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education because the office believes that AHEAD’s standards are more relevant to the function and operation of an office geared toward accessible education. The purpose of this assessment was to evaluate the degree to which Disability Services meets or exceeds the national standards. The assessment also identified areas the unit needs to improve.

ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE
AHEAD’s Program Standards have 8 different areas of standards for a total of 28 performance indicators. Each performance indicator in turn has multiple action-statement criteria, for a total of 90 different criteria. During summer semester 2009, Disability Services established a Self-Assessment Review Team, which was composed of the director, assistant director, coordinators, and program assistant. The team reviewed the degree to which Disability Services had been meeting each AHEAD standard and performance indicator using a three-point rating scale, with “1” indicating “does not meet,” “2” indicating “partially meets,” and “3” indicating “fully meets.” The review team then met to evaluate Disability Services programming using each of the performance indicators and action-statement criteria, ultimately developing action plans to address the discrepancies it identified between Disability Services programming and the AHEAD standards.

FINDINGS
Overall, Disability Services meets the standards and performance indicators set by AHEAD, with a compliance rate ranging from 73 percent to 100 percent. Of the eight areas the standards address, Disability Services fully meets the standards in the areas of Academic Adjustments, and Counseling and Self-Determination. The office also received a high compliance rate (93 percent to 97 percent) in the areas of Consultation and Collaboration, and Policies and Procedures. Disability Services has identified these four areas as program strengths.

However, the area of Training and Professional Development, which, at 73 percent, received the lowest rating, was identified as a weakness of Disability Services. Within this area, the performance indicator measuring whether “Disability Services provides Disability Services staff with on-going opportunities for professional development” was rated lowest, with only 55 percent compliance. This shortcoming mainly resulted from a lack of funding to provide training opportunities for all Disability Services staff.
It should be noted that Disability Services fundamentally disagrees with some standards and performance indicators, such as Information Dissemination, Faculty and Staff Awareness, and Policies and Procedures. This disagreement is reflected in the ratings the office received in the first two of these three areas. For instance, Disability Services philosophically differs with the following standards and performance indicators: “The office ensures access to information about disabilities to students, administration, faculty, and service professionals” (2.1D); “Disability Services should provide disability awareness training for campus constituencies such as faculty, staff, and administrators” (3.3); and “The office develops, reviews, and revises procedures for notifying staff (e.g. interpreter, notetaker) when a student will not attend a class meeting” (6.3F). Disability Services believes that these standards are paternalistic interventions and do not align with the office’s vision of achieving equal access and self-determination by students with disabilities.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the assessment results, Disability Services resolved to put several actions in place with the goal of exceeding AHEAD’s program standards. The following paragraphs indicate the areas and performance indicators that Disability Services has identified for improvement, as well as the specific actions recommended for each area:

1. Consultation and Collaboration
   1.1 “Disability Services serves as an advocate for issues regarding students with disabilities to ensure equal access.”

   To better fulfill this performance indicator, Disability Services needs to improve collaboration with deans and the Faculty Senate to foster a strong institutional commitment to Disability Services and thus ensure equal access for students with disabilities. In addition, Disability Services needs to create a specific Web page to announce extracurricular activities, with the goal of fostering meaningful participation of students with disabilities in campus life. Ideally, Disability Services would also like to collaborate increasingly with key administrators on policy implementation and to keep administrators informed of emerging disability issues. Such collaboration would become a possibility if the workload of Disability Services staff were made more manageable.

2. Information Dissemination
   2.1 “Disability Services disseminates information through institutional electronic and printed, publications regarding disability services and how to access them.”

   To better fulfill this performance indicator, Disability Services should work with Academic Affairs and the Faculty Senate to implement a policy, including a course syllabus statement alerting students of the instructor’s willingness to provide reasonable accommodations, to guide the manner in which faculty inform students of their intent to provide equal access. In addition, Disability Services should work with Academic Affairs to revise the current faculty evaluation such that it would evaluate accessibility under the heading of “diversity.” In order to assist faculty in ensuring that their instruction and curriculum is accessible, Disability Services should participate in new faculty orientation to provide information about the office.

   In terms of electronic publications, the Disability Services Web site should link to other information resources such as Curry Health Center, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the new ADA Accessibility Guidelines. In addition, Disability Services should consider redesigning its Web pages to simplify the file paths.

   2.2 “Disability Services provides services that promote access to the campus community.”

   To better fulfill this performance indicator, Disability Services’ Web site should provide guidelines promoting effective communication for the UM campus community. For example, Disability Services should request that
all videos on the UM Web pages be captioned. More generally, Disability Services should continue promoting among the campus community the importance of Web accessibility and accessible online instructions that use accessible PDFs, videos, and Word documents.

In addition, Disability Services should recommend to UM’s ADA Team that it disseminate more information through its Web site, and advise the team more generally on the development of effective communication methods.

Finally, Disability Services should provide more outreach to educate faculty about access issues, although the current caseloads of the staff make this action difficult to perform.

3. Faculty and Staff Awareness
3.1 “Disability Services informs faculty regarding academic accommodations, compliance with legal responsibilities, as well as instructional, programmatic, and curriculum modifications.”

To better fulfill this performance indicator, Disability Services should meet with faculty, teaching assistants, and adjunct instructors more often in order to inform them of academic accommodations and how to comply with legal responsibilities, as well as instructional, programmatic, and curriculum modifications. However, the unit foresees that it will be challenging to increase faculty training at this point due to the maximized staff workloads and the number of students the office serves. The unit should also increase information regarding accessibility policies and guidelines for faculty on its Web site.

3.2 “Disability Services provides consultation with administrators regarding academic accommodations, compliance with legal responsibilities, as well as instructional, programmatic, physical, and curriculum modifications.”

To better fulfill this performance indicator, Disability Services would like to provide more consultation with administrators, including the ADA Team, the Office of the Provost, the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs, Facilities Services, and the Office of the Vice President for Administration and Finance, regarding academic accommodations, compliance with legal responsibilities, and instructional, programmatic, physical, and curriculum modifications.

3.3 “Disability Services provides disability awareness training for campus constituencies such as faculty, staff, and administrators.”

To better fulfill this performance indicator, Disability Services should be involved in Facilities Services’ training for maintenance practices, which came from the 2004 U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights review.

6. Policies and Procedures
6.5 “Disability Services assists with the development, review, and revision of policies and guidelines for settling a formal complaint regarding the determination of a ‘reasonable accommodation.’”

To better fulfill this performance indicator, Disability Services should publish on its Web site the grievance procedure to be followed when the office denies a student’s accommodation request, which entails an administrative review by the unit’s director.

7. Program Administration and Evaluation
7.1 “Disability Services provides services that are aligned with the institution’s mission or services philosophy.”
To better fulfill this performance indicator, Disability Services should work on adding community services to its office’s mission to align with UM’s mission.

7.3 “Disability Services collects student feedback to measure satisfaction with disability services.”

To better fulfill this performance indicator, coordinators should continue encouraging students to use Barrier Reports as a means to offer feedback indicating their level of satisfaction with Disability Services.

7.4 “Disability Services collects data to monitor use of disability services.”

To better fulfill this performance indicator, Disability Services should follow the department’s assessment plan and review it periodically.

7.6 “Disability Services provides fiscal management of the office that serves students with disabilities.”

In an effort to fulfill this performance indicator, Disability Services has developed program budgets and has provided fiscal management of the office. However, the Program Assistant who is in charge of fiscal management also handles test modification coordination. Although the job should be separated to ensure better fiscal management, no funding is presently available to create a test modification coordinator position.

8. Training and Professional Development
8.1 “Disability Services provides disability services staff with ongoing opportunities for professional development.”

To better fulfill this performance indicator, Disability Services should develop and formalize training for its new coordinators on civil rights and functional limitations. Subsequently, the unit should also assess the ability of new staff to comprehend training information, and should develop screening tools and conduct ongoing screening to determine whether the new employee is able to meet the standards and expectations of the job. However, with the exception of the sign language interpreters (because sign language interpreters have to continue meeting the standards set by Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf in order to maintain certification), Disability Services is unsure of how to conduct a need-assessment of the knowledge and skills of its staff. Presently, Disability Services only has enough funds for the professional development of its sign language interpreters.

Some of the actions described above overlap with the department’s five-year strategic plan, which Disability Services staff composed in April 2009. Therefore, during fall semester 2009, Disability Services will merge its action plan with its strategic plan. Furthermore, the unit will periodically review the merged plan as a means to measure progress and determine whether objectives are being met.

In proceeding to the next phase of the study, Disability Services will conduct an external comprehensive program review in fall semester 2009 or spring semester 2010 to ensure that services provided by Disability Services meet or exceed AHEAD’s program standards. An individual from outside the unit, who is knowledgeable and has extensive experience in the disability services field, will be invited to be a member of the external program review team.