ABSTRACT

Disability Services for Students (DSS) conducted an assessment to improve overall office function and program offerings. The unit created a comprehensive plan to address these areas deemed “in need of improvement” by an external reviewer: (1) staffing, (2) office technology, (3) services for the deaf and hard-of-hearing students, (4) testing accommodations, (5) the webpage, and (6) e-text conversion services.

The unit met seven times to evaluate encumbrances. Shortly thereafter, DDS set about hiring a fourth coordinator; garnering greater technological support from the Resident Technology Assistants (RTAs); implementing collective policy and procedures for interpreting/captioning services; enhancing testing accommodations; redesigning the DSS web page to utilize the Cascade Server; and exploring external funding for e-text upgrades.

To accomplish program improvements in a timely, realistic manner; the unit included pertinent information, such as actions, methods, and deadlines in its 2009-14 Strategic Plan. DSS has already completed some actions for improvement by recruiting an additional coordinator, upgrading staff computers, securing additional testing space, and updating web pages. To ensure continued progress, DSS will periodically review and assess its plan.

BACKGROUND

DSS invited the director of Disability Services at The State University of New York-Buffalo to visit The University of Montana. In March, Randall Borst met with administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Together, they identified the unit’s strengths, commending the dedicated, highly-qualified staff; the robust auxiliary aids, including a number of highly-qualified interpreters; and the outstanding services DSS provides the campus community. Offerings such as assistive technology training and e-text production have helped DSS garner a strong reputation. According to the reviewer, DSS’ implementation of best practices for self-determination by students with disabilities is one strength among many; however, improvements are warranted.

The reviewer observed that “DSS is operating at or beyond the limit of its ability to provide adequate services and accommodations to meet student demand.” He highlighted the following areas for improvement:

1. Coordinator Position

At the time of the external reviewer’s visit, DSS served nearly 1,100 students; each coordinator provided assistance to over 350. This demand led student review participants to stress their concerns about the timeliness of staff responses and the difficulty scheduling appointments with coordinators. Thus, understaffing prevents DSS from assuring quality service delivery and student satisfaction.

2. Technology

The reviewer identified old or obsolete staff computers as an impediment. For example, one computer could not be repaired for six weeks, causing inefficient productivity. Therefore, the external reviewer recommended computer upgrades for staff members.

3. Deaf and Hard-Of-Hearing Student Services

The reviewer indicated that policies and procedures for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, especially related to interpreting and captioning services, need to be clarified. He identified information dissemination as a critical step
toward educating students and faculty. In addition, he recommended the unit conduct a periodic assessment of captioning services.

4. Test Modification Services

Limited resources such as space and staff have kept DSS from meeting the high demand for test modification services. Having found no additional testing locations on campus, DSS has hosted students in its offices and the offices of other, consenting departments. During the unit’s busiest time—the week of final exams—this problem becomes more apparent. Student review participants expressed their frustration; they found the indeterminacy of test locations disruptive to their concentration (Distractibility/concentration are functional impacts of some disabilities for which test modifications are originally recommended). For some students, not knowing the location of and specific environmental factors of their testing venue provoked additional anxiety (Again, one of the functional impacts for which test modifications are recommended).

5. DSS Web Page

According to the reviewer, students and faculty do not visit DSS web pages because the pages are unattractive and wordy. He recommended they be redesigned attractively for the purpose of marketing the unit as well as increasing the site’s resourcefulness. Effective pages will allow DSS to communicate more efficiently with its constituency.

6. E-Text Conversion Services

The reviewer cited delayed e-text conversion delivery to students with print disabilities as a deficiency. DSS has improved e-text conversion services significantly in the last two years by creating the comprehensive tracking system, hiring a new assistant for instructional materials, and upgrading e-text computers. However, the unit acknowledges the need to explore continued upgrades to its infrastructure.

**ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE**

DSS met seven times to discuss: (1) staffing, (2) office technology, (3) services for the deaf and hard-of-hearing students, (4) testing accommodations, (5) the webpage, and (6) e-text conversion service; all considered by an external reviewer to be in need of improvement. The unit created a qualitative method for identifying strategic issues, goals, and actions; utilizing the Association on Higher Education And Disability (AHEAD) program standards as reference. Various DSS staff members assumed leadership roles; their charge was to gather information on specific issues.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on an external reviewer’s findings, detailed discussions, and the staff’s own vision for DSS, the unit identified the following directives:

A. Hire a fourth Coordinator by August 1, 2010

Review and revise the fourth Coordinator’s job description; determine a schedule for the coordinator’s time at the COT; advertise the open position, and hire the new staff member.

B. Solve staff computer problems and other technological impediments with SAIT assistance

Explore ways to gain more effective support from the Resident Technology Assistants (RTAs), including possibly sharing an RTA with other Student Affairs units. Identify and dedicate budget funds for new computers based on a 3-4 year rotation system.

C. Improve interpreting and captioning services for deaf and hard of hearing students
Research existing policies and best practices from other institutions regarding interpreting/captioning services, such as CART and C-Print, quality assessment standards, student transcription provisions, copyright procedures, and attendance policies. Establish collective policy and procedures for interpreting/captioning services based on research findings. Procedures should include faculty protocol for handling audio course material, such as film soundtracks. Publish policy and procedures, and disseminate information to the faculty. Finally, assess the quality of captioning services.

D. Improve testing accommodations by updating forms and establishing procedures for scheduling exams

Continue to collaborate with other departments in Lommasson Center during peak testing times and consider acquiring additional permanent testing space. Continue to obtain student feedback on test accommodation services. Create an adequate data collection system to monitor testing data and space issues. Research practices of other institutions’ test accommodation services. Define and create a position description for a 9-month, full-time testing coordinator. Edit the test modification form.

E. Update the DSS web page and transfer its content to the Cascade Server

Edit the DSS web page and collaborate with Student Affairs Information Technology (SAIT) to transfer existing content to the new server. Conduct a student survey online. Maintain the improved tracking system by collaborating with SAIT staff.

F. Provide a timely, alternative format conversion service

Explore external funding to upgrade e-text computers, scanners, software, and staff training.