

## **PRACTICE BRIEF**

# **Walking the Walk: Modeling Social Model and Universal Design in the Disabilities Office**

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### **Abstract**

Making the shift from the medical model of disability to the social model requires postsecondary disabilities offices to carefully examine and revise policies and procedures to reflect this paradigm shift, which gives them the credibility to work toward such change on the campus level. The process followed by one university is covered in-depth, as well as outcomes and implications.

An increasing number of disability professionals in higher education settings are promoting the concept of universal design (McGuire & Scott, 2006; Burgstahler & Cory, 2008; Scott, Loewen, Funckes, & Kroeger, 2003). The primary focus of these efforts has been on the instructional environment. A review of projects recently receiving federal funding to improve the quality of education for students with disabilities reflects this same trend as the majority of these project provide resources and professional development to faculty, but do not address the disability service environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Block, Loewen, and Kroeger (2006) suggest that in order to “implement a change in philosophy on campus, staff in Disability Services offices must explore and identify changes they can make in their offices and departments in order to model the paradigm shift to other institutional staff.” Guzman (2008) challenges disability professionals to incorporate the disability studies perspective into the service model. Though this challenge has been issued to disability professionals, and several professionals are cited as restructuring the service environment, the professional literature is lacking in terms of models of implementation and in terms of the impact that these changes have on the campus environment.

### **Problem**

Historically, society has viewed disability in a negative light. In this view, the disability is a “problem” that exists within the person and the goal is to “fix” that person. This medical model view of disability has been central to our culture for so long that it should be no surprise that many people have a negative connotation of even the word “disability.” Project PACE at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR), under what was then known as Disability Support Services (DSS), was the leader in moving the campus toward reframing disability and embracing the social model, which posits that disability is an aspect of one’s diversity, and therefore is not something to be viewed negatively (Gill, 1994). Faculty development was conducted in an effort to educate about universal design, and one-on-one technical assistance was provided to help faculty and staff make this shift. It became apparent, however, that DSS was not modeling the behavior it was trying to teach, because DSS policies and practices clearly reflected the medical model of disability. In order for efforts to promote social model and universal design to be credible, the DSS staff needed to take a step back, look inward and make changes that reflected these

core values. The staff recognized the need to explore messages conveyed through the name of the office, mission statement, syllabus statement, letters to professors, documentation and guidelines, and all policies and procedures, and to modify those to be in line with the desired paradigm shift.

### Students and Location Information

The UALR is a metropolitan commuter university centrally located in the state. Only a few miles from the UALR campus is Lion's World Services for the Blind, the Arkansas School for the Deaf, and Arkansas School for the Blind. UALR has a large percentage of non-traditional students, with the average student age being 28 years. UALR has enjoyed a favorable reputation nationally for the work done by the disabilities office, largely due to innovative grant projects over the last couple of decades. In addition, UALR has a dynamic online master's degree program in rehabilitation counseling. For all of those reasons, UALR attracts many disabled students from the area and all over the country. Over 35% of students in the rehabilitation counseling program alone have disabilities (G.M. Szirony, personal communication, March 12, 2009). The University is known nationally for its innovative services for deaf and hard of hearing students, including an exemplary speech-to-text program, for creating disability-related professional development videos and handbooks that are utilized around the world, and for the support from administration in disability-related matters.

### Strategy

In an effort to identify strategies for sustaining the changes being made on the UALR campus through a grant-funded program called Project PACE, the Director participated in an online course offered by AHEAD in the spring of 2006 entitled "Acknowledging and Transforming Disabling Environments." As a direct result of this institute, the PACE Director met with the Director of the DSS office at that time, Susan Queller, to discuss plans for modifying language and practices of the DSS office. A planning retreat of the complete staff was held and this was included as one of the priorities for the office's five-year plan. Preliminary discussion occurred among the staff regarding the rationale and purpose for this objective.

The DSS management team met to establish priorities for change. As recommended in Block, Loewen, and Kroeger (2006), the management team did a preliminary

review of the documents and web presence of the office and analyzed them in terms of the messages they were sending, considering whether they reflected social model or medical model approaches to disability. A cursory review clearly identified a problem with consistency of message and resulted in the establishment of some initial priorities.

A strategic planning approach to making changes was implemented to address the concerns that were identified by the management team. This was a question-driven process which posed the following questions: Who are we? Where are we now? Where are we going? How will we get there? How will we know when we are there? Through this process, the management team identified several layers to address in the process of becoming more aligned with the vision of full inclusion of people with disabilities for the campus community—focusing solely on those areas under the purview of the disability service office. The identified areas of focus might be divided into four over-arching areas—language, policy, process, and practice—though it is acknowledged that some overlap exists between these broad categories. The management team chose *language* as the first priority and this area is thus the primary focus of this practice brief.

Second to changing the name of the office to Disability Resource Center (see Table 1), the mission statement was identified as the most critical item to address. The entire DSS staff engaged in a discussion of the importance of changing the language in the mission statement and worked collaboratively to make changes to the language that reflected current thinking about disability. The former mission statement was written several years prior and the language clearly reflected medical model thinking. Words like "assisting," "insure," "support services," "special needs," and "allow" emphasize the disability professional as being the expert who is helping the student achieve access and success. The focus is on the student rather than the environment.

*Former mission statement:* The mission of DSS is to eliminate physical and academic barriers and to fulfill the Division of Educational and Student Services concept of assisting students in achieving their educational, career, and personal goals through the full range of institutional and community resources. In addition, the office was established to insure that students with special needs receive support services and accommodations to allow them equal access to all UALR programs, and that they have the op-

Table 1

*Office Name*

Old	Disability Support Services
Problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The terms “support” and “services” reflect a medical model perspective. They imply that students with disabilities need “support” and keep the focus on the student as the problem rather than placing the focus on environmental barriers.</li> </ul>
New	Disability Resource Center
Reasons for change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We want to create an image that is consistent with the other shifts we have made over the years. We are a resource to students and to the campus community and provide services to both.</li> <li>• Often, in fact, our role is to assist the campus community in creating more usable and inclusive environments. When this is accomplished, access for students with disabilities is seamless.</li> <li>• The name “Disability Resource Center” indicates that we are a resource to students as well as other members of the campus community. Through the years we have taken on the role of providing resources and technical assistance even beyond the campus community, in both a routine and very regular way when our colleagues from other institutions call us for assistance and advice, and through programs such as PACE and PEPNet-South/Arkansas SOTAC.</li> <li>• Some offices are choosing names that place the focus more directly on the environment—such as Center for Educational Access or similar names. We acknowledge that these names do indeed reflect social model in that they place the responsibility for access less on the student and more on the environment. However, some proponents of name changes that remove the term “disability” argue that students steer away from their office because of that term. This is a reflection of the problems of our society and the lack of acceptance of diversity. We want to change the way people think about disability rather than shrink away from the reactions that people have to that term. We hope that through our work, our campus community will begin to see the power that goes along with that term and will embrace the rich history of the disability rights movement. We hope that they will come to see disability as an aspect of diversity that is integral to our society and to our campus community.</li> </ul>

portunity to realize their potential.

The new mission statement was crafted based on the language from several other sources. It includes language from the mission statement of UALR’s Educational and Student Services Division, the AHEAD UD Initiative model mission statement, and University of Arizona’s mission statement. It is more consistent with new thinking about disability and with the current focus of the office. It emphasizes the collaborative role of the staff and changing the environment rather than simply responding to each student’s access request.

*New mission statement.* Providing access to a diverse student population is embedded in the philosophy of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. We recognize disability as an aspect of diversity that is integral to society and to the campus community. To this end, the Disability Resource Center collaborates with students, faculty, staff, and community members to create usable, equitable, inclusive and sustainable learning environments. We promote and facilitate awareness and access through training, partnerships, innovative programs and accommodations.

The focus of this statement is on collaboration with students rather than support or service to students. Words like “usable,” “equitable,” “inclusive,” and “sustainable” integrate the concept of universal design into the office mission.

The office staff continued with this process, reviewing and modifying the office name, the office tag line, the office structure, job descriptions, position titles,

documentation guidelines, letters to professors, and syllabus statement. A few examples of these changes can be viewed in Tables 1, 2 and 3. For each change, the staff documented the old version, the problems with that version, the new version, and the rationale for the change. To date, the DRC has updated almost every publication and the majority of language on the web site, as well as some policies and procedures, to reflect this paradigm shift. The student handbook has been completely revised, and the Disability Resource Center staff is in the process of dramatically changing the faculty handbook as well.

**Observed Outcomes**

The process of collaborating as a team to make the changes was extremely beneficial as it highlighted the different perspectives individual staff members brought to the table with regard to disability and the role of the disability office. The process increased awareness of the need for ongoing dialogue among all of the staff as they work to create a paradigm shift both within the office culture and in the campus as a whole.

Several members of the staff in the Disability Resource Center have reported increased job satisfaction as a result of these changes. The shift to more proactive roles has been especially meaningful for many of the staff. Under the old system of focusing solely on accommodations, staff often felt they were ‘bailing water,’ and never truly making a difference. The new focus on the environment and making systemic, proactive change

Table 2

*Office Name*

Old	The Education You Want, The Services You Need
Problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus is on the student’s needs, not on the need for changes in the environment.</li> <li>• Communicates that the student needs professional services to get an education</li> </ul>
New	Creative Solutions. Together.
Reasons for change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can include either environmental changes or accommodations, but has a more positive feel and emphasizes collaboration.</li> </ul>

Table 3

*Syllabus Statement*

Old	<p>Disability Support Services: It is the policy of UALR to accommodate students with disabilities, pursuant to federal law and state law. Any student with a disability who needs accommodation, for example in arrangements for seating, examinations, note-taking, should inform the instructor at the beginning of the course. It is also the policy and practice of UALR to make web-based information accessible to students with disabilities. If you, as a student with a disability, have difficulty accessing any part of the online course materials for this class, please notify the instructor immediately. The chair of the department offering this course is also available to assist with accommodations. Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact Disability Resource Center, telephone 501-569-3143 (v/tty), and on the Web at (former website).</p>
Problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language emphasizes legal requirements and the student as the locus of the problem.</li> <li>• When legal mandates are emphasized, it creates a culture that asks, “What do we have to do? What is required? What is the minimal response?”</li> <li>• The statement is labeled “Disability Support Services” which sends the message that access is directly tied to that office, rather than being available to all students with disabilities.</li> </ul>
New	<p>Students with disabilities: It is the policy and practice of <i>the University of Arkansas at Little Rock</i> to create inclusive learning environments. If there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion or to accurate assessment of achievement—such as time-limited exams, inaccessible web content, or the use of non-captioned videos—please notify the instructor as soon as possible. Students are also welcome to contact the Disability Resource Center, telephone 501-569-3143 (v/tty). For more information, visit the DRC website at <a href="http://www.ualr.edu/disability">www.ualr.edu/disability</a>.</p>
Reasons for change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The language places the problem with access in the environment and the responsibility with the designer of the course.</li> <li>• It is addressed to “students with disabilities” rather being tagged with the office name. Some barriers can easily be removed as a result of collaboration between the student and the professor without further intervention. This statement leaves room for that process to occur.</li> </ul>

has proven to be quite appealing and energizing for the DRC.

Disabled students have reported being pleased with the shift in focus from the individual to the environment. The concept of the social model has helped some recently-disabled students to reframe how they view themselves and their disabilities. Some students have reported feeling empowered by the teamwork approach to making environments at UALR more usable.

DRC personnel continue to make modifications to policies and procedures recognizing that this process is ongoing. Now that significant changes have been made in the DRC, efforts have been renewed to influence faculty and staff to embrace these concepts. Efforts to date have focused on presenting to the Chancellor's Leadership Group, the Dean's Council, Educational and Student Services, Academy for Teaching and Learning Excellence, and Faculty Senate. As helpful as those efforts were, however, one-on-one work with faculty has had the greatest impact. Rather than just responding to professor's questions about accommodations, the focus is now on helping faculty to view an accommodation request as a signpost that something in the environment is disabling, and brainstorming solutions that improve the learning environment for everyone.

### Implications

Other universities around the country have been exposed to social model and universal design, and are making necessary changes in their own policies and procedures to reflect this paradigm shift. The UALR DRC's efforts to document specific changes made to date should prove to be helpful to other universities as they embark on a similar journey. The literature review clearly revealed that there is the need for scholarly writing—both anecdotal and research-based—in this area.

As disability resource professionals frame their role as the designers of the service environment, the focus shifts toward creating a usable, equitable environment in the disability office and beyond. In doing so, the disability office becomes a model of universal design and the social response to disability. This role offers great potential for facilitating and sustaining change on the campus at large.

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## About the Authors

Melanie Thornton is the Director of Project PACE and the Associate Director of the Disability Resource Center at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. She has over 20 years experience working in the field of disability with 10 of those years in the higher education setting. She has presented at numerous conferences, has consulted nationally and internationally and has authored and co-authored several articles and a book chapter. Melanie services AHEAD through the Universal Design Leadership Initiative.

Sharon Downs serves as the Director for the DRC. She develops and recommends policies and procedures that

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