

Improving Student Services: A Study of Disabilities Resource Offices at Jesuit Institutions

By

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ABSTRACT. Colleges and universities are seeing an increasing number of students with requests for accessible education assistance. Many offices dedicated to serving these students have some difficulty doing so due to not having enough staff, resources, or time. The purpose of this project was to compare the disabilities resource office websites of seven comparable Jesuit universities and colleges to provide recommendations for areas of improvement. Content analyses were conducted on the websites of each of the schools. Each website was looked at systematically to find as much information as possible. After data was input on a spreadsheet, memos about overall impressions were written, and the data were analyzed by comparing the schools in categories of interest. Results indicated that some of the most important factors were the number of staff members each school had and the outside resources that offices provided on their websites. Santa Clara University had the fewest staff members (two) and no outside resources linked. Other universities such as Seattle University had a list of information on disabilities, local doctors and clinics, employment help, as well as more staff members with specialized roles. The findings from this research can be used to make recommendations for disability resource offices, along with including a campus accessibility map, a program similar to University of Denver's Learning Effectiveness Program, and Landmark College's policies and academic paths.

INTRODUCTION

This research is focused on comparing the resources and accommodations available at disabilities resource offices at different Jesuit colleges and universities. The purpose of this research is to better understand how to improve the resources and accommodations available at universities as a whole, especially Jesuit universities. With direct comparisons to other schools and recommendations given based on those comparisons, this research will help administrators know how to best allocate resources to better serve their students in their academic journeys.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disability can be defined both from a medical perspective and a social perspective. According to Goering (2015), the medical view sees disability as coming from an individual's body and their impairment(s). It is a problem to be fixed or treated, and the disadvantages they face are due to those impairments. The social perspective on the other hand views disability, or how we think of it, as resulting from what a society thinks of as a "normal" person. Any disadvantages faced are a result of physical and structural exclusion from buildings and opportunities offered to others, not from impairments themselves. Taking both perspectives into account is important for disabilities resource offices, as their goal is to help their students gain access to the academic opportunities they would not be able to otherwise.

The number of students with disabilities in higher education has increased in the last few decades (Lombardi et al. 2018, Toutain 2019), which has impacted the offices that are dedicated to serving those students as they struggle to keep up with their college workload. The American with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted in 1990 to ensure that students with disabilities in postsecondary education were protected and given accommodations to allow them to succeed academically, however, the implementation of the ADA varies from school to school. Additionally, mental health disorders can fall under a disability, which increases the number of students that need accommodations and resources to succeed (Lombardi et al 2018).

Barriers in Higher Education

Barriers to students with disabilities is a common problem in higher education and the reason that disabilities resource offices exist. An initial barrier can be feelings of shame for having disabilities, which can cause students to not disclose their disabilities to their professors or other faculty, putting them at a disadvantage (Lombardi et al 2018). Additionally, even if students do receive accommodations for their disability, they may not even use them because they do not want to be labeled or stigmatized by their peers or faculty at school (Toutain 2019). Students may also not know what accommodations or resources are available at their school, and sometimes are only made aware of the disabilities resource office after not doing well in school for a period of time (Toutain 2019). This can be due to the fact that college students with disabilities are not given the same degree of protection middle and high school students have, so they must be more proactive in seeking resources and helping themselves (Jackson 2014).

Faculty themselves can pose a barrier to students, as they might not understand what support is needed for their students, and the attitude of faculty towards students with disabilities can hinder or facilitate their learning (Rosario 2021). Some faculty may not be empathetic or put the needs of a class above the needs of a disabled student, acting to the academic detriment of that student. On the other hand, faculty that are empathetic and positive can be a big help to their students, as they might feel more

encouraged to do their work and do well academically. Simply being concerned about their student is helpful and can create more trust and better communication between the professor and student. Proper assistive technology can be very helpful for students and could promote autonomy and independence, which allows faculty to provide more individual attention to those students (Rosario 2021). However, it may be difficult for some faculty to make changes to their curriculum, how the class is structured, or to the materials to fit the needs of disabled students, on top of their regular workload (Rosario 2021). For example, it might be hard to make entire PowerPoint lectures that were already prepared accessible to a blind student if the professor is overworked with their other classes. Faculty may also not know how to use technology and software that makes it easier for disabled students to succeed academically (Rosario 2021).

Another issue for students with disabilities is the accessibility of university websites, as it may be difficult to navigate for a variety of reasons (Rosario 2021). It may be hard to find information about accessibility resources on the universities website and can be too complicated or take too long to find starting from the homepage. Having to resort to clicking around or making a search and hoping their search is correct can be frustrating and time-consuming for students, and links might have to be scrolled down to or be hard to see due to being small or at the very bottom of the page (Jackson 2014).

Barriers can also come when registering with their disabilities resource office and asking for accommodations. The documentation they are required to submit may lack information about the impact of symptoms on a student's learning, social interactions, or work performance, as well as not having information on their functioning across different settings, as in the case with students diagnosed with ADHD (Weis 2019). This may prevent them from receiving the proper accommodations they need, leaving them at a disadvantage. The accommodations they want may also not be available at their school for a variety of reasons, and even if they do receive their accommodations, they may not be functional or helpful for a student (Toutain 2019).

Disabilities Resource Offices

Disabilities resource offices (DROs) are dedicated to helping the students with disabilities at their school get accommodations, but are often hindered from being able to do so properly. Offices are structured differently depending on the school, which prevents a standardized way of organization that can be used as a guideline for offices that are looking to expand or change the way their office is run. Some offices meet with any student that asks for an appointment, while others give their staff a dedicated set of students they work with and may be assigned other students (Scott 2017). However, many offices are understaffed and have staff work overtime from their homes so that everything can get finished (Scott 2017, Toutain 2019). Another problem related to understaffing is that there are often too many students per advisor or staff member, which prevents them from dedicating the needed amount of time to each student (Scott 2017). Offices can also have variable responsibilities for the same role due to different needs and staffing, so directors do not have a standardized list of responsibilities, and in many offices, the responsibilities are fluid so that whoever is available is able to work on what is needed (Scott 2017).

Effects of COVID-19

The effect the pandemic has had on disabilities resource offices and its students has led to many frustrations from both parties. There has been an increase in anxiety, depression, and other mental health-related requests made to DROs, and it is harder to get mental health care in private schools (Scott 2020). It has also been harder to communicate about accommodations and provide the necessary documentation from students to DROs (Scott 2020), and harder to access everything needed for remote learning, such as wi-fi, equipment, needed technological support, health services, and many other things (Scott 2020). Registering and getting accommodations became more difficult as everything was forced to be online (Scott 2020).

COVID-19 brought additional problems in how courses were offered and delivered to students. Teachers suddenly did not know how to accommodate some of their students in addition to converting their classes to an online version. Online courses cannot be treated the same way as in-person courses when it comes to their accessibility, and so need a new approach to ensure that the content is inclusive, engaging, and accessible (Guilbaud, Martin, and Newton 2021). Common challenges for instructors are that they do not have enough time to properly transition or modify their courses to be online, or take the necessary training to do so. Their workload also causes many to take a reactive approach to challenges rather than a proactive approach, making it harder for them to properly accommodate students (Guilbaud et al. 2021). For instructors that have to quickly transition their courses due to changing regulations and COVID surges, it is challenging to make their content fully accessible without help from their school.

Staff in DROs also experienced difficulties getting the resources and technology they needed to do their jobs properly (Scott 2020), and had to deal with more students registering and asking for accommodations, while also not having the staff and resources to be able to properly help all of them in a timely manner (Scott 2021). However, as COVID progressed things were better for DRO staff and students overall, and burdens were lessened as processes for registering and getting accommodations became smoother (Scott 2021).

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Content Analysis of Websites

This study utilized content analysis of college websites to compare DROs. The reason for looking purely at websites was due to both time restrictions and because from the viewpoint of a student, having that information easily accessible without having to contact the office would be helpful when registering with the office or when needing to know more about the office. The websites for DROs should have comprehensive information that is representative of what their office offers.

Sample

The sample consisted of six Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States in addition to Santa Clara University, mostly based on the West Coast, with two schools in other areas of the country for additional comparison. The West Coast schools were Gonzaga University, Seattle University, University of San Francisco, and Loyola Marymount University. The other two schools were Boston College and Creighton University. There was a focus on schools in the West Coast because of a higher similarity to Santa Clara University in location, culture, and number of enrolled undergraduate students.

Table 1. Location, founding date, and undergraduate population, Data gathered from the US Department of Education

School	City/State	Founding Year	# of Undergrads (Fall 2020)
Santa Clara University	Santa Clara, CA	1851	5,608
Boston College	Chestnut Hill, MA	1863	9,780
Gonzaga University	Spokane, WA	1887	4,852
Seattle University	Seattle, WA	1891	4,244
University of San Francisco	San Francisco, CA	1855	5,852
Creighton University	Omaha, NE	1878	4,458
Loyola Marymount University	Los Angeles, CA	1865	6,673

<https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

Table 1 includes data about each of the schools analyzed along with Santa Clara University. All of the schools were founded at around the same historical time period and they have similar undergraduate student populations. Boston College had the highest at 9,780 students and Seattle University had the fewest with 4,244 undergraduate students in 2020.

METHODS

After choosing the sample of schools to look at, open coding was used to create an initial list of categories starting with a non-Jesuit school that was not in the final sample. Case study methodology (Yin 1994) was used in conjunction with the University of Denver as an example to develop a procedure on how to progress through web pages and look for more categories for the full analysis. The reason for using Denver as an example was because it is a campus that is known for having a model DRO with a unique complimentary program and having a similar undergraduate student body as the schools would be studied. The website was also previously looked at in preliminary research, and it stood out for being thorough with the information it provided and how it was formatted. Santa Clara University was also used to develop more categories due to greater familiarity with the website but was still part of the main sample. After these initial reviews, the emergent codes were put in a spreadsheet.

For each of the six remaining colleges in the sample the following procedure was used: after arriving at the homepage of each school, a 30-minute timer was set to provide a similar time limit for information gathering at each school in the sample. The information on the front page of the DRO website was looked at first, with the different tabs

following in order, being as thorough in clicking links as possible. Once a code that was listed on the spreadsheet was found, it would be noted down with the relevant information. After looking through all of the tabs and links, any missing information on the spreadsheet would be looked for through the website again to see if it could be found. After filling in the information for each school, memos were written down on the overall impression from the website and if there were things that stood out and could be adapted into the SCU office.

Almost all of the categories after the first seven were developed when looking at either the University of Denver website or Santa Clara's, with the exception of the campus accessibility map, which emerged when analyzing Boston College. Two categories were dropped in the middle of data collection due to not being as relevant to the current study as initially thought, those being if there was information specific to online learning and if there were user guides available.

LIMITATIONS

A main limitation of this sample is that it is only Jesuit institutions mostly focused on the West Coast. Other non-Jesuit institutions may have a different approach to disability services that would be worth researching. Another limitation is that the data are limited to the website only and other methods such as interviews were not used. Further, the website may not be fully updated due to various circumstances, such as understaffing, which is a prevalent problem in disabilities resource offices across the country. While a website for an office should provide sufficient information about itself, just because it does not provide it does not mean that the office is not run well or effectively.

ANALYSIS

After collecting data, the spreadsheet was organized into a more condensed table that was easier to read and pick out differences from. This included removing unnecessary categories that did not have major differences between the schools or would need additional information that was not available on the websites. Among these categories were the name of the office, how accessible the physical office is, the average number of clicks it took to get to the website from the school's main page, and their goal or mission statement. The remaining categories were looked at across the different schools, looking at how they compared to each other and adding any new notes at the very bottom. The most important ones then were picked out based on the notes written and how big the differences between schools were. They were converted into individual tables that were further simplified for clarity, such as combining categories under staff and adding checkmarks where appropriate. These categories are discussed in the findings.

FINDINGS

Number of Staff

One of the main findings was the difference in the number of staff between the schools. Out of the West Coast schools, Santa Clara University has the least number of staff members at two, with the next lowest being Gonzaga and San Francisco with five staff members each. Creighton University also has two staff members, while Boston College does not have a dedicated page to its staff, with references to a Director and Assistant Director being the only information available. Gonzaga University, Seattle University, and Loyola Marymount University have additional uncommon staff not shown in Table 2. Gonzaga has a Program Assistant, Seattle University has a Senior Director and a Media and Access Technology Coordinator, and Loyola Marymount University has a Graduate Assistant. The higher number of staff members allows the schools to have a wider variety of roles, such as Seattle’s Media and Access Technology Coordinator.

Table 2. Number and type of staff at each disability resource office

School	Number of Staff	Director	Associate/Assistant Director	Disability Specialist/Accommodation Coordinator	Administrative/Office Coordinator
Santa Clara University	2	X	✓	✓	X
Boston College	?	✓	✓	X	X
Gonzaga University	5	✓	✓	✓	X
Seattle University	6	✓	✓	✓	✓
University of San Francisco	5	✓	✓	✓	✓
Creighton University	2	X	✓	✓	X
Loyola Marymount University	6	✓	✓	✓	✓

Outside Resources Linked

Another finding is the type of outside resources that are linked on each school’s website. Santa Clara University’s and Creighton University’s don’t have outside resources linked, while Gonzaga University and Boston College have a few resources available. Seattle University has the most outside resources available, with lists of community resources, practitioners, and clinics available, along with additional resources for parents and instructors. Loyola Marymount University’s list of opportunities also stands out with the scholarship and job opportunities that they gather and present to their students.

Table 3. Resource links provided by each school’s disability resource office

School	Resources Listed
Santa Clara University	None

Boston College	Note taking strategies handout
Gonzaga University	Books and links for parents
Seattle University	Community resources such as testing, clinics/agencies transportation, employment, education, and individual practitioners with more detailed information, articles for parents, various resources for faculty
University of San Francisco	Mindfulness resources, various online resources for people with disabilities
Creighton University	None
Loyola Marymount University	Several links for more information on disabilities and opportunities such as scholarships and jobs

Presentation of Information in Non-Text Formats

The variety in how information was presented was an additional interesting finding. Only Santa Clara University and Loyola Marymount University had both pictures and videos on their website, explaining how to register and apply for accommodations. Seattle University, University of San Francisco, and Creighton University had a few videos on registering with the office and videos for faculty but had no pictures.

Table 4. Variety of information presented

School	Text	Pictures	Videos
Santa Clara University	✓	✓	✓
Boston College	✓	X	X
Gonzaga University	✓	X	X
Seattle University	✓	X	✓
University of San Francisco	✓	X	✓
Creighton University	✓	X	✓
Loyola Marymount University	✓	✓	✓

Campus Accessibility Maps

A final main finding was which schools had campus accessibility maps. These maps show where accessible entrances are in different campus buildings, as well as what those accessibility options are. Boston College, Seattle University, and University of San Francisco all had some sort of campus accessibility map. Santa Clara University, Gonzaga University, Creighton University, and Loyola Marymount University only had regular campus maps with no accessibility options.

Table 5. Campus Accessibility Maps

School	Accessibility Map
Santa Clara University	X
Boston College	✓
Gonzaga University	X
Seattle University	✓
University of San Francisco	✓
Creighton University	X
Loyola Marymount University	X

OTHER FINDINGS

There were several other small findings that were school specific that should be mentioned. The University of San Francisco had a long document with all the types of accommodations that they provide and a description of each one. Seattle University has a glossary of disability related terms, and Boston College has a list of various disabilities and impairments with explanations that is aimed at educating faculty so they can better help their students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, hiring more staff is one of the top recommendations for DROs, though it may be self-evident already. With more staff, offices would be able to meet with students in a timelier manner and look at expanding the office with different projects and programs, rather than having to focus most of its time on appointments with students so that they can get accommodations. Additionally, building a list of outside resources for students would help them better navigate their time at their school and know of some potential places to turn to for issues that may be outside the scope of their school's DRO. Some smaller recommendations that can be implemented are an accessibility map of campus, which shows where there are accessibility options in the different buildings, as well as what type of accessibility it is, such as elevators or powered doors. Adding more videos and pictures explaining various processes would be helpful for both students and professors wanting information from the website, and having more detailed information about accommodations, disability terms, and disabilities/impairments can help professors who are not used to accommodating students be more empathetic towards them.

Best Practices Recommendations

Universities looking to improve their DROs might also want to explore the two programs discussed below.

Learning Effectiveness Program at University of Denver. Along with the usual Disabilities Services Office, the University of Denver has an additional program for neurodivergent students, where they get individualized help each week. It specifically helps students with Specific Learning Disabilities, ADD/ADHD, on the Autism spectrum, or who have had a history of learning differences. The Learning Effectiveness Program provides its students with weekly academic counseling, subject-specific tutoring, executive functioning support, social skill building resources, peer mentoring, college transition support, and other resources. Students have to apply to the program separately from the Disabilities Services Office, and there is a quarterly fee if accepted. However, scholarships are available for students, so even those that may not be able to afford the program are still eligible for it. Students are encouraged to visit the office of the program to find if it would benefit them.

Landmark College. Landmark College is a college specifically for students with learning disabilities, which makes it much more sensitive and innovative in how they help its students succeed. It offers various educational paths so that students can take classes at their own pace and in a way that suits them best, along with diagnosis-specific support. It helps students learn about their learning disability in their first year so that they can better advocate for themselves, and has a variety of research labs focusing on learning disabilities. Their Neurodiversity Hub prepares students for careers in a way that best supports neurodivergent students, and they provide support to their students throughout their whole time at the college, rather than having a traditional disabilities resource office.

CONCLUSION

The needs of students with accessible education requests will only increase over time. This project provides specific examples of how universities can prepare for this reality. The websites for disabilities resource offices of seven Jesuit institutions were compared on a variety of categories to determine practices and programs that can be adapted. Hiring more staff members and providing a list of resources outside of the DRO are among some best and simpler steps offices can take to better serve their students in an impactful way. Additional things that can be added to websites are campus accessibility maps; videos and images for tasks such as registering; and more information about disabilities, impairments, and accommodations. For more in-depth changes to how offices are structured and inspiration for new programs, the University of Denver's Learning Effectiveness Program and Landmark College provide examples of what can be done. With these practices, DROs can provide better support for its students and for the faculty that teach these students, especially as many still face the new challenges that were brought with COVID-19.

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