Fostering Student Success
Beyond the Podium Podcast

Alexandra

Hello, my name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey, and I'm the host of the Beyond the Podium podcast series at the University of Florida. This podcast series focuses on teaching and learning. And we're here today with Ashley MacSuga-Gage an Erica McCray, two faculty at the University of Florida who are dedicated to the success of their students.

They're here to share some of their great stories, and some of the useful tips they've developed during their many years of teaching all kinds of students. But especially, they're here to share how to best support their students with disabilities.

Dr. Erica McCray

I've had students in their junior year say, I've never had a faculty member ask me how they can help me, or what I needed to be successful. And so for most students that come to me and they struggled, it's because faculty weren't aware of how to help them.

Alexandra

Erica has a wealth of experience working with all kinds of students. She's been both diligent and dedicated in her exploration of how she can best help all of her students. And she took the time to explain this to us.

Dr. Erica McCray

My experience with working with students with disabilities in higher education, it runs the gamut. As you said, some of them come in and they know what they need, they've gotten great instruction through their P12 experiences, they've had teachers teach them about self-determination, how to advocate for themselves. And they're very upfront. They'll come to you with a letter from the Disability Services Center, or not. But they're clear on here's where I struggle and here's what I need. That's fine. Let's do it. I'm glad you're able to articulate that, and I can go from there.

Then there are other students who will come and they'll persistently have problems with the work. And so usually I'll call them into my office and say, I want you to be successful. How can

I help you? Some know, some don't. For those that don't know, I'll then start asking about specific tasks and what I see as difficulties potentially, and ask them about different ways they've gotten instruction before, or what teachers have done that they felt really helped them, or what teachers do that, you know, prevents them from being successful. And so I try to work with them that way.

Even when students come to us as faculty with letters from the Disability Resource Center, it usually gives some strategies, such as extended time or quiet setting or alternative response formats other than-- no matter what. When a student comes to me with a letter-- thank you for your letter. Now tell me what I can do to help you be successful. Aside from what the letter says, this just lets me know that you've gotten some documented support in place.

But if it says you need extended time, is that really what you need? Or do you need other scaffolds put in place so that you can be successful? And so I really just try to meet the students where they are. Because if they made it this far, they persisted. And if we've accepted them to the university, I feel like we have a responsibility to help them be successful to graduation.

Alexandra

Students facing these challenges do not have an easier academic career. Instead, Erica tells us that these accommodations that some of these students receive simply serve to create an equitable experience. And Ashley highlights for us the fact that many of those students face challenges we may not know, understand, or be able to identify.

Dr. Ashley Macsuga-Gage

I will say, many of our students have either diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health issues-- anxiety, depression. There is a large gamut of students that are struggling in those ways that are in our classes. We also have students who may have eating or gastrointestinal, you know, physical disorders that aren't things that you necessarily see, but are things that they definitely cope with in terms of trying to get to classes on time, trying to sit in a class for two hours when that's a physical difficulty for them. So students that have those needs.

Alexandra

Students facing these challenges do not have an easier academic career. Instead, Erica tells us that these accommodations that some of the students receive simply serve to create an equitable experience.

Dr. Erica McCray

I think the expectations are just as high, and there's nothing easier about having a disability. Individuals with learning disabilities, individuals with mental health needs, individuals with physical and sensory impairments that are obvious-- there's nothing easy about that. So giving them an opportunity to access the learning opportunity that a typically developing student has, I feel like it's leveling the playing field. It's not giving them an advantage.

So I think, also, it's easier for those on the outside to see a physical impairment or a sensory impairment and think, OK, well, I know they might need a different seat, or I know they might need it in an audio format if it's a visual need that they have. But with individuals with learning disabilities, mental health needs, which is the larger population of students with disabilities, it's harder to conceptualize how they might need something different in order for it to be an even opportunity or an equal opportunity.

And so thinking about the equity of the experience-- they're all paying tuition. They're all expecting to leave here with a degree that means something. They're all expecting to get the full learning opportunity. And we have to do things a little bit differently in order for them to do that. And that's our responsibility. It's not any easier. It's making it so that they can access it.

Alexandra

These invisible disabilities can certainly be difficult to understand or to grasp. How exactly do these learning disabilities impact students?

Dr. Ashley Macsuga-Gage

Well, I'm actually going to reference my own child for a second. So I have a daughter, my middle daughter, who actually has a learning disability. And she also has a very high IQ, an IQ that's so high that she's gifted and talented. But because of her learning disability, the way it impacts her is that her short term memory is significantly impaired. So if you give her multi-step directions, if you say, go upstairs, get your bag, close the door to your bedroom, and come back down, she maybe hears go upstairs and she doesn't get the rest of that.

Because she is so intelligent, the way that that impacts her in school, and she's in middle school right now-- I promise this'll get back to the point. She's in middle school right now-- is that she performs just below average. So not low enough to get services or accommodations or modifications, but not in line with what she's actually able to do with her actual performance level based on her IQ.

So what that does is, she doesn't have a history of that learning disability impacting her before she's in a college setting or a secondary setting. When we have students in our classes who are struggling to keep up, who are struggling to follow along, they may also have been in that similar

situation where in high school they were able to compensate with their IQ, their intellect, their context cues, the things that they've been able to pull from before in the past, and they probably performed average, maybe a little bit above average.

But when we get to the university level and content is harder, more involved, there are more multi-step directions to follow, both verbally and then, in addition, that are written or directed through online modules, students can start to fall behind. And they don't have that history of knowing about themselves

what they need through accommodations and modifications. And so what tends to happen is they feel like they're failing. And when they feel like they're failing, that kind of tends to spiral.

And so you see depression, anxiety. You'll see a student no longer participating or who maybe never participated in the first place because they don't know what's happening. And in many cases, when we've had students who have come and said, I don't know why this is happening, but it's a repeated pattern in many of my courses, or, it's happening to me in all of my courses, we can refer them to the DRC to let them connect with the Disability Resource Center to see if they want to or need to have an evaluation, because they may have something like that, as you said before, that they're not aware of.

Alexandra

Unfortunately, many students complete high school and move on to higher education settings with no record of services received for their learning disabilities. And these accommodations are crucial, and become even more important in more advanced educational settings, as Ashley explains.

Dr. Ashley Macsuga-Gage

So an accommodation is in no way, shape, or form a lessening of responsibility. And I think that's where folks get confused. They think that if I'm making an accommodation, I'm making an exception, an exception in the sense that you don't have to do what your peer has to do, or you don't have to perform to the same standard. And that's not what is accommodation is. An accommodation is giving someone the tools to perform the same task or to achieve at the same level as you are expecting their peers to do.

So for example, I have a colleague who is a PhD graduate from a counselor education program at a university in New England. And she herself has a form of dyslexia, that is a learning disability, where it takes her, for every one hour that I spend reading or writing a paper, approximately three to four hours to my one hour. So for her, if she has an exam in class and I have an exam in class and we're in the same class, I'm timed, which is fair because the expectation is that during that time I answer the questions to show you that I've learned the content and I can produce that knowledge on this assessment that the instructors designed.

She is not timed because when she writes, it takes her three times as long as me. She can still take that exam in a room without anything to assist or to guide her. The only difference is she has the time to show that same exact knowledge. It's the same exam. It's the same content. It's the same demonstration of knowledge. The difference is I'm giving her the tool or the strategy or the chance to have the time to produce that knowledge because that's what's in line with her disability.

It's not an exception. It's not a change. It's not giving her a different opportunity. I'm expecting the same. I'm just doing what she needs in order for her to be able to show me what she's learned.

Alexandra

As instructors, we can plan courses that will best serve our students from the very beginning by using universal design of learning.

Dr. Erica McCray

Universal design came out of what we typically think of as architecture and physical space design. So we think about curb cutouts and ramps versus just steps. And so it's just thinking about, how do we make sure access happens from the outset? In some of our teacher ed courses I always tell my students, we're not just teaching to the middle, spraying and praying that everybody else gets it. We're setting it up so that everybody can be successful from the beginning. Might we still have to make some accommodations for individual students? Absolutely. But if we think about the needs of everyone from the beginning, then we have a better likelihood of everyone being successful, and then there's less work to do later on.

So when I'm thinking about designing my courses, I'm thinking about what is going to speak to each student and hook them in. So for some students, they want you just to give them the reading and they'll do it independently, and let them go, and they'll be fine. Other students, they need to hear it and they need to engage in discussion because that solidifies the content, particularly for students with learning disabilities.

A lot of individuals who have, particularly, dyslexia, the auditory input is critical. They need to discuss it. They need to think about it. They need to have the pressure of reading for knowledge removed to the greatest extent as possible. And so from the outset, if we're thinking about all of these possible needs and setting it up so that it's rich in content and access in all these different ways, then it's potentially more work on the front end for the faculty member, but it makes the opportunity, the learning opportunity greater for the students, and there's less work on the back end for faculty in thinking about how to modify or make accommodation if they've done it in the beginning.

Alexandra

Does UDL really work? Is the effort put into UDL an effort that receives rewards? Does it impact the experience of students in the long run?

Dr. Ashley Macsuga-Gage

I was recently, last year, given the course Exceptional People to teach. And it's a course that has a pretty rich and long history here you UF-- over 20 years of being taught. And that course has a lot of elements of universal design for learning built into it by the nature of the subject matter. And we had a student who joined the course who was visually impaired. And she was able to fully participate in the course in all of the activities and access all of the materials without us actually having to change anything because of the way that the course was already built.

So for example, one of the things that she had as an accommodation because of her visual impairment was that she needed to have audio and closed caption as part of any video that she would look at. We already had that in the course. So we didn't need to make any changes. But there were other students in the course who came up to me and said, I always have trouble following if a video is put on in class, what's happening. Having those words really helped me to see and hear and take better notes. Thank you.

So it seemed like those were accommodations that would be specific to someone with a visual impairment, but really there were other students in class who had no accommodations who were benefiting as much if not more than she was because that was something that supported their learning.

Alexandra

Using universal design can really transform the experience of students, and not just to students with disabilities, but all students. Ashley provides a great explanation of how it is that universal design really works.

Dr. Ashley Macsuga-Gage

At one point we talk about leveling the playing field. And when I think about leveling, I think about that's giving everyone the same opportunity in so many ways. So if you're-- there's a graphic out there that shows three people lined up at a fence. And first it shows one person who is very short, a person who's medium height, and a person who's taller height. The person who's taller height can see over the fence to watch the game. The person who is medium height can't quite make it, and the person who is short can't see at all.

So kind of the first step we take is we tend to think about, all right, well, what can I do to get everybody to the same height as the tall person? So the middle person gets one box to stand on. They can see over the fence. Then the person who's the shortest gets two boxes. OK, they can see over the fence. All right, so we all see over the fence. And so those might be a form of accommodations that we use in certain contexts to level the playing field.

But then the next picture shows actually the fence, which was made of wood, changed to one that's made of wire mesh. So that where the folks are, they can stand short, medium, or tall, and see the game right through it. And I think that's another level. That's the UDL level of things, our universal design for learning.

Alexandra

The most important aspect of getting started with universal design is by asking a simple question.

Dr. Ashley Macsuga-Gage

At the end of the day I ask myself with any assessment or assignment, what is the goal? What is the outcome? What do I want students to walk away from this when I'm no longer their professor and actually be able to do? If timing doesn't get you to that goal, don't time. That doesn't make sense.

I teach a classroom management course. If my students can't verbatim answer a question about what reinforcement is because they don't understand it, that means that when they go out into a classroom, they don't know how to praise students. They don't know how to help them work for a goal. So that's my teaching goal. Not, did you get it done correctly in this amount of time?

Alexandra

Knowing the ultimate goal of any activity or assignment can help us determine how it should best be given. Ashley has found that removing the time limit is an easy way to have a significant impact on student success.

Dr. Ashley Macsuga-Gage

In my courses, again, that are smaller-- for my larger courses that can be more difficult because of room scheduling-- I've stopped timing all quizzes and tests. And what I will tell you is that nine times out of 10, maybe even more, the last students to finish are not my students that have extended time. The other thing that that's done is it removes the stigma for my students who do have extended time of having to leave the room.

And a lot of times, students may not come forward and may not tell you that they have a particular accommodation because they want to just try, because they don't want to be different than their peers. And very rarely has it been my student who actually has extended time that takes all of the extended time. But there are others that need it, and they have done better on assessments when I removed the time limit. So that's one thing that's just a really easy one.

Alexandra

Erica also offers her very own suggestions for using UDL in the classroom. And one of her immediate go-tos is scaffolding.

Dr. Erica McCray

And building a scaffold is also, I feel like, critical. If there's a high stakes project due at the end of the semester, not springing that on students two weeks before it's due, but building in elements of practice, opportunities throughout. So if there's a paper at the end, how do you get them opportunities to review literature early in the semester with support from you? And then from there, getting them to synthesize and get feedback on their synthesis so that by the time they get to the project, it's just a matter of putting those skills together.

Alexandra

One last suggestion Erica offers is that one of the most important things to all students is to feel our excitement for their learning.

Dr. Erica McCray

I hope that my students will sense my enthusiasm for learning and for them to be successful, and that they'll take that with them. I want my students to remember, I remember I had a course one time, and I remember at least one thing she said, but beyond all that, she was excited about me learning.

Alexandra

Erica and Ashley offered a number of easy to implement ideas and strategies. For more of these easy to use tips, you can check out the handout included in the podcast materials. We hope you enjoyed this episode of the Beyond the Podium podcast series. For more tips, tools, and strategies on teaching, please visit the teach.ufl.edu website. And please, send us your ideas for future episodes and/or comments. We look forward to hearing them and to seeing you next time.