



Rising Above Adversity

Beyond the Podium Podcast

Kendra Saunders

Each semester, I've had students who have disabilities or identify as having a disability in my class, and one thing that's always been really surprising to me is how often those students are some of the highest achievers that I have in my class.

Alexandra

Welcome to this episode of the Beyond the Podium podcast series. My name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey, and I'm the host of the series. Today we get to chat to some folks who are enthused, excited, and passionate about their students' success and the contributions they make by helping faculty and students connect. The DRC, or Disabilities Resource Center, is chock-full of people ready to help faculty help their students. Gerry Altamirano, Beth Roland, and Kendra Saunders are sharing their stories and ideas, along with their students, Rosanna, Julia, and Emma. The DRC is here primarily to reduce barriers by first listening to people's stories and guiding the necessary support.

Gerry Altamirano

We are perpetually kind of fighting this battle of removing attitudinal, technological, physical, and then internal barriers, right? What we have to do as disability advocates-- as social justice advocates is to listen to people's narratives and allow them to guide where they want our support.

Alexandra

So what are the students with disabilities like? Especially, those with invisible disabilities. How have they made it to the University of Florida? And what has their journey here been like?

Julia, Student

Well, OK. So high school was interesting. It was really interesting. I was away a lot of the time. So I was competing at science fair or I would be in New York or I would be in-- just all over different places. And I would miss a lot of school. And so it was difficult. So I have a processing

disorder, so I have a lot of difficulty. I just need the instruction time and I need to be able to connect with the teacher and ask questions. And that's my big thing. If I can't ask questions, it's not happening.

So that was a big struggle for me, especially in high school, was not being there and not being able to ask questions. And then teachers got really frustrated with me and were like, well, if you want to go do this science thing so badly, then I guess you just are on your own. And so that was a difficult thing in high school, in particular, and kind of navigating that relationship with the teacher where I want to learn and I really do want to be involved. But also, I have this thing that I have to do. I have to go. And the research that I was doing-- it was and still is very important, and it was a big part of my life and still, obviously, continues to be, since I'm here at UF doing research.

And so it was kind of, how do you balance science? And how do you balance wanting to be kind of a high achieving student outside of school? And also my learning disability. Actually, I didn't read 'til I was in second grade. I had a very, very difficult time reading. But once it clicked for me, we had lots of-- you know, they run tests and they do all kinds of things and my mom was like, well, is she just stupid, or-- you know, there's biases that come with disability. Is she just dull or thick or whatever? I'm not.

That's just kind of behind it and that's part of seeing the person behind a disability. And obviously, I have been able to do lots of things, and my disability doesn't define me in any way. It's a learning disability. Honestly, 40% of the population has at least some minor form of a learning disability. So it's not some-- I haven't really struggled or done anything like-- I've never felt like it was a big part of my life.

But finding out was-- I was diagnosed initially as a second grader when I legitimately could not read. And that was difficult. But then I, one day, and it was weird. I actually remember the day that reading clicked for me. And I was-- I'm reading at-- obviously, now I'm reading on level. But in the next two years, I went from being a drastically, drastically, drastically below level reader to reading, like, college level texts and things like that. So once it clicks, it clicks. But until it clicks, it's really, really hard.

But then we didn't pursue getting my individualized education plan-- my IEP, until I was a junior in high school. And so I went my freshman and my sophomore year without an IEP, which was very, very difficult. So once I got my second diagnosis-- the official high school thing, it got a lot easier because teachers would be like, oh, well this is not just her complaining or being annoying or having-- or she's not just dumb or thick-- and those are horrible words to use. But it's just kind of what reality was.

But yeah, so once I was diagnosed, it was a lot easier for me to get the help that I needed. One thing that this thing with my learning disability has taught me is that I have to work really hard, and if I don't work really, really, really, really hard, then I am not going to succeed. So it has instilled in me this kind of really aggressive work ethic, where I'm going to get it done. So right now, it's not impacting me as much, since I'm not taking those classes.

But next semester, I'll be taking calculus, which is going to impact me a lot. I don't really know, as of now, what it looks like for college for me. But I do know it's going to be me working very, very hard. And I think that's another big thing to clear up is, like, a learning disability-- it's not somebody being lazy. My friends that also have learned disabilities-- they're some of the hardest working people I know, by far, because they can't get away with not working hard.

Alexandra

For most students with disabilities, the struggles and barriers they face were present long before their arrival at the University of Florida. Some, like Julia, found the support and help they needed early on. But many just dealt with their barriers and challenges alone, like Emma.

Emma, Student

High school was interesting for me. I dealt with a lot of weird medical health kind of sine curves of, like, what's kind of going on? So around the middle of my freshman year, I started developing some weird symptoms, like really bad migraines every day, and I could go on and on. But basically, they ended up diagnosing me with an autoimmune disorder called POTS, which is a silly acronym. It's Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome, which, in short, is basically-- blood doesn't flow as well as it should. So veins-- when you stand up, they're usually supposed to constrict so blood goes up to your head, so you don't pass out. Things like that. Mine don't do that very well.

So that was what I was dealing with for a while, and so the headaches 24/7-- I was just always-- it got pretty bad during my sophomore, junior year. So I wasn't actually around a lot of my high school years. I tried to be, and I pushed myself really hard to be, but sometimes it just wasn't possible. And so dealing with that, along with taking hard, rigorous classes, and being with everybody else who was having kind of a normal high school experience-- it was a little weird. So I'd say the experience in high school, for me, was, I guess, a little bit exceptional from other people's.

I know teachers, a lot of the time, weren't super educated about these kind of things and how to deal with students that were having health issues or mental health issues or really anything of the sort-- disability at all. They weren't very equipped to deal with that, and it was hard sometimes getting around-- trying to keep up with school and make it work with teachers, as far as moving deadlines and exams and whatnot. I know a really prominent experience comes to mind. I had been in the hospital having a diagnostic surgery done, and I had missed about two weeks of school at a time. And I went back to my AP physics teacher, and we'd had an exam and I said, you know, I don't think I can take this. I haven't been here to learn any of the material. And he said, well, that stinks. I wish you luck, and made me take it.

And so it hadn't been that bad in my other classes, but it still kind of gives you the idea that they just don't really know what to do. And so coming here, knowing that they actually have a resource here on campus for people with disabilities, helping them to navigate the world of college and professors and them not really knowing what's going on was awesome. And so I felt like that was a great way to get involved and help just kind of spread that around because it's clear that in other places, it's not very-- the awareness of disability and everything of the sort is not as great as it could be.

Alexandra

Many of those highly gifted students with learning disabilities survive and even thrive in high school, due to their extreme efforts. They do not get the support they need until they arrive at the University of Florida and meet the folks at the DRC and our exceptional faculty. As Emma explained, the culture of the University of Florida and the DRC create an environment dedicated to student success. Rosanna also discovered this in her first year at the University of Florida.

Rosanna, Student

I always noticed that there was something wrong with me in math. So I just felt like my visual spatial intelligence was really, really bad. Anytime you would put patterns in front of me or numbers, I really, really suffered with that. I mean, I suffered in geometry because a lot of that is about shapes and visual spatial intelligence. Well, I took college algebra my very first semester, and it was a summer B term, and so that class was like a full time job for me. I was in class, like, 20 hours, and then I also went to office hours and I went to the Broward Teaching Center, and then I also worked with other students because I wasn't the only one who struggled. So I admit that. And we all would try to me on the weekends to talk about problems and stuff, and so the work was at a very, very fast pace. So I didn't get to really have any fun.

So I waited until December of my freshman year-- so it December of 2014-- to reach out to Amanda Brown at the disability research center. And then I got tested with a school psychologist in January of 2015. And so she found out exactly what I was describing. So my visual spatial intelligence is very, very terrible. And yeah, so the disability research center really helped me to try to figure out how to do a reduced course load and try to find alternative options for things like the special stats class. And also, they provide leadership roles that you can have within some committees they have there, and it's just a lot of fun to plan that. And also, scholarships for students who have a disability. I didn't even know that they had those things, and I wouldn't have known if I didn't go there.

Alexandra

So what is at the heart of the DRC's efforts? What is it that they hope for in their work with students?

Beth Roland

I hope for two things for the students who come through the door. I hope that they can feel empowered that the differences that they have, because of their diagnosis or their disability, are not less than other students-- that they can recognize the strengths that they have and that they can share those strengths within the University community.

Alexandra

All students come to the University of Florida with diverse gifts and talents, and all will face barriers at one time or another. Faculty, staff, and the folks at the DRC can help students identify their gifts, rise above their challenges, and achieve their dreams. Thanks for listening to this episode of the Beyond the Podium podcast series on teaching and learning.

This episode is part of a two part segment. For strategies and tips, listen to part two in the series, as some of our faculty share what works best for them. For other tips, tools, and ideas, check out and subscribe to the full podcast on SoundCloud, iTunes, or Stitcher through the teach.ufl.edu web page. Thanks again, and see you next time.