IUP *The* Advisor Advocate

Advising Students with Disabilities

Under-representation of students with disabilities continues to be an issue in higher education and the professional world. Students with disabilities are at higher risk of taking longer to complete their degrees or not completing a degree at all (Zilvinskis, Barber, Bronzinsky & Hochberg, 2020). Advisors play a crucial role in helping students with disabilities navigate their coursework, degree success, and future career opportunities.

Department for Disability Access and Advising (D2A2)

D2A2 is IUP's leader in providing services to students with disabilities. When a student registers with D2A2, they are assigned a D2A2 advisor (in addition to their academic advisor) who guides the student through the process of securing documentation and requesting accommodations.

The student's academic advisor may or may not know about the student's disability. It is the student's right to disclose or not disclose their disability. The majority of students registered with D2A2 have hidden disabilities (psychological and learning disabilities), and they may or may not wish to disclose.

Referring Students to D2A2

Students may choose not to register and receive services, or they may not know that services are available to them. New college students may be hesitant to disclose a disability because they fear stigma and the experience of "everyone knowing" like they may have had in secondary school. Here are some tips for having this conversation with advisees:

❖ If a student mentions having an IEP or 504 plan in secondary school, this indicates they received services in the past and could be served by D2A2

❖ Ensure that D2A2 is completely confidential

❖ Normalize disabilities – show acceptance to your advisee and emphasize that there are many students who are served by D2A2

Let students know they can get in touch with D2A2 by emailing
disability-access@iup.edu. They can schedule an appointment to discuss services.

Advising Students with Disabilities - Best Practices

❖ Remove barriers

By law, all programs and services at IUP need to be made accessible, including academic advising. Are there unintentional barriers that keep your advisee from meeting with you or accessing information you are sharing?

D2A2 breaks accessibility into two main categories:

Physical Access

Can the individual get in the building and navigate it and services?

Does your meeting space create an accessible environment: well-lit and free from noise and distractions?

Alert Facilities if a building has an accessibility need.

Programmatic Access

Can the individual access the materials and answer the questions?

Are alternate means of communicating information available?

D2A2 can assist in programmatic access, such as helping make documents into accessible PDFs

❖ Check your assumptions

Never assume a student can't do something because of their disability. Encourage your advisee to pursue their goals. Connect them to services with accommodations that can help.

❖ Present opportunities

In "Measuring the Differential Effects of Behaviors of Academic Advisors for Students with Disabilities," researchers analyzed advisor behaviors when advising students with disabilities compared to the general student population. Using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the researchers found that students with disabilities were less likely to be informed about high-impact opportunities such as study abroad, internships, and research projects.

In light of these findings, make sure that you connect all students to opportunities and co-curricular engagement, regardless of their ability status.

References

Zilvinskis J., Barber R.E., Brozinsky J.L., & Hochberg S.R. (2020). Measuring the Differential Effects of Behaviors of Academic Advisors for Students with Disabilities. *NACADA Journal*. 2020;40(2):15-32. doi:10.12930/NACADA-19-25