



## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Program Review Student Disability Services**

## **EXTERNAL REVIEWERS**

Loring Brinckerhoff, Ph.D., Educational Testing Service  
Lisa M. Meeks, Ph.D., University of California, San Francisco

## **CAMPUS VISIT:**

October 3 – 4, 2016

In the fall of Academic Year 2017 Student Disability Services (SDS) conducted an external review by Loring Brinckerhoff, Ph.D. and Lisa Meeks, Ph.D., two highly regarded, experienced, scholar/practitioners in the field of postsecondary disability service provision.

A comprehensive review of SDS found many positive attributes. SDS enjoys a well-established and respected reputation on campus, however, some faculty members think that the SDS office is primarily a place for proctoring exams – not the sole entity on campus that determines reasonable accommodations for students, which is its primary charge. SDS is a “high-touch” setting that caters to the unique needs of approximately 950 registered students with documented disabilities. SDS staff are dynamic, energetic and widely known across campus for their dedication to student support. They routinely respond to oftentimes complex student service requests with compassion and professionalism, adhering to federal and state laws that protect this vulnerable population, while also upholding the integrity of the myriad academic programs and university policies they must be knowledgeable of; a constant balancing act that could have severe legal consequences if not done thoughtfully and efficiently. Additionally, SDS has many faculty advocates who are eager to take on a broader role of carrying out the mission of the SDS office. The major challenges of increased student requests, exam proctoring services, and office location, however, are undermining and destabilizing the important work that SDS performs for the university community.

The number of students SDS serves has increased 34%, in the past three years, and 126% in the past 10 years. Currently, this translates to approximately 10 new students per week. Escalating service demands on the office, coupled with an unmatched increase in staff, is jeopardizing SDS’s ability to safely and effectively provide equal access to the students it serves. An additional disability specialist position is imperative if we are to continue to provide legally mandated services and accommodations, let alone the high-touch, supportive, and comprehensive services we are known for.

Another challenge is the record number of exams being proctored by SDS each semester. In the academic year 2015-2016, SDS proctored 2700 exams, an increase of 69% since 2013 and 145% since 2009. Given that there is no testing center per se on campus, SDS has assumed this role by default in an effort to support USF faculty – however this is no longer sustainable. SDS staff reportedly spend 20-30% of their professional time each week on proctoring-related accommodation issues – a very poor use of time for personnel in a professional position, and symptomatic of a reactive approach to the issue. At a minimum, a proctoring coordinator is needed to coordinate the 1000s of exam requests, proctoring services, room reservations, and faculty issues that arise each year regarding proctoring services. This new position would also give professional staff more time to devote to their intended job duties: responding to student service requests. Realistically, a testing center is needed to serve the entire USF campus.

Finally, the present location of the SDS office is problematic for three major reasons. First, students with disabilities uniformly raised the office location and entrance as a core concern, noting that it is difficult to locate (due to limited signage and location) and stigmatizing (e.g. “those students” go to the basement for services). Second, the location also sends a message to the greater university community that USF does not prioritize this department – devaluing the department and therefore reducing its authority. Third, SDS has outgrown its current location due to increase in number of students served, and exams proctored. It is recommended that SDS be relocated out of the basement of the library to a location more visible and easily wheelchair accessible, with a suitable waiting area that respects student privacy, and space where students can gather and get to know one another. Further to the their point of devaluing the department, and the university community not seeing SDS as the final word on disability matters, Drs. Meeks and Brinckerhoff also recommend the Director’s reporting line be shifted to one that is on par with the Senior Director of Counseling and Psychological Services.

Other administrative recommendations were made, as well as recommendations for broadening the assistive technology position role. Increased faculty training is also strongly recommended, provided additional staff resources are made available to alleviate the director’s caseload, giving him time to develop and execute the faculty trainings.