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# Conversations with Leaders: Angela Szczepanik-Sanchez



When

Angela Szczepanik-Sanchez worked as a K-12 special education resource teacher, parents and teachers kept asking her variations of the same question.

“What happens to students with disabilities after they leave high school? Can they succeed in higher education? Will they be employed?”

With the U.S. Department of Education reporting almost 20% of undergraduate students having a disability, from learning disabilities, to chronic health issues, and mobility issues, Szczepanik-Sanchez decided to find out the answers to those questions herself, and entered the world of higher education in disability services. Now as the Director of [Access Services for Students with Disabilities](#) at [Governors State University](#), she incorporates her previous experience into her work.

While working as a special education resource teacher, she was a case manager for students with visible and non-visible disabilities implementing the individualized education plans that were created for them.

After her time as a case manager, Szczepanik-Sanchez began working at Calumet College of St Joseph before coming to Governors State in the summer of 2019. Her current role is to guide and assist college students through how to manage and advocate for their educational needs while navigating what supports and services are available.

"At Governors State, I'm helping students to understand the differences between having accommodations in K-12 and receiving these supports and services in post-secondary education and the responsibilities as a student when it comes to self-advocacy and self-efficacy," she said. "A lot of this work is teaching them to be their own advocate."

One semester after Szczepanik-Sanchez arrived at GSU the COVID-19 pandemic rerouted her work to remote settings.

"This is a stressful time for students who are learners that thrive in a face-to-face educational environment and now we are learning remotely, virtually, online, in a synchronous and asynchronous format. For some student with disabilities, your day-to-day can be quite challenging when you have to learn differently and be in front of a computer screen for so many hours while still being expected to academically meet the requirements."

Szczepanik-Sanchez assists students who may need accommodations such as extended time for assignments and tests and coordinating services such as recorded lectures, note taking assistance, and alternative texts.

Szczepanik-Sanchez measures her success by the growing number of students utilizing the services.

"That means students are using the services and resources on campus so they can be as successful as possible," she said. "I know that in some way, shape, or form, they've made a connection with their fellow students, faculty, and staff and have made a further connection with Student Disability Services to inquire about services and accommodations."

One of Szczepanik-Sanchez's goals for [Access Services for Students with Disabilities](#) is to remove the stigma behind using the office's resources.

"Sometimes, the language used to describe the office of disability services can be overwhelming and intimidating or carry a stigma with it. It can make students question, 'How do I know if I even qualify for services and accommodations? If I do qualify for services and accommodations, will I be viewed/treated differently in my coursework by my peers and professors? Should I disclose or not disclose my disability?'" she said.

"Information about disability services is on every syllabus, but when we look at the syllabus we focus on the expectations, requirements, and due dates of the assignments and assessments, but we don't always look at or focus on what the university offers as far as services and resources."

Szczepanik-Sanchez wants to reshape the way the office is viewed by making connections with students, faculty, and staff. She wants to show that the office is just another resource on campus for students.

“Services and resources such as Academic Advising, Academic Resource Center, Career Services, Center for Junior Year, and the Counseling Center, are all available to students at GSU and Student Disability Services is another one of those services and resources that is available to students whether you’re brand new to college, transferring or you’ve been enrolled in classes a couple of years and decide you may need some support,” she explained.

She also point to the partnerships within GSU, such as the Student Disability Services Advisory Committee (SDSAC), and within higher education, such as the Illinois Board of Higher Education Disability Advisory Committee (IBHE DAC). These partnerships create opportunities to discuss disability issues in higher education and student affairs as they relate to serving students, providing them with information, resources, and tools for addressing and meeting student's unique needs.

Through events like GSU's [College of Health and Human Services' Conference](#) for adults with disabilities, Szczepanik-Sanchez also fosters connections outside of Governors State. She points to organizations like Label Us Able, which works with local universities, libraries, and park districts to see what programming is provided for people with disabilities.

"Label Us Able in partnership with the Southland Community, GSU, and other colleges and universities in Illinois, will hopefully be able to offer programming for people with physical and developmental disabilities where individuals will have a space to socialize, network, learn, and take coursework that can lead to a certificate, a degree, and/or future employment," she said.

"Partnerships and connections with others on and off campus will help us answer that question of “What happens to students with disabilities after they leave high school?” We all forge our paths differently, and these partnerships and connections show it is possible and we can do this. The goal is to create Access, Awareness, and Collaboration!”