

Transcript of OSA Insider Episode #89

Educational Support and Disability Services at UMB: Could This Be Right For Me?

With Ms. Deborah Levi, Director of the Office of Educational Support and Disability Services at the University of Maryland, Baltimore.

Neda Frayha: Hello, and welcome to the OSA Insider, a podcast about medical student life and the journey to becoming a physician. I'm your producer and host Dr. Neda Frayha. I'm an internist and a member of the Office of Student Affairs at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. Welcome to July, the official start of a new academic year. We hope you all have a fantastic year ahead, no matter where you are in your journey.

For today's episode, I would like to thank Dr. Beth Lamos and Dr. Connie Lacap for recommending a wonderful guest whom all students should know about. Ms. Deborah Levi is the Director of the Office of Educational Support and Disability Services, or the ESDS, at the University of Maryland Baltimore.

She works closely with students from all schools to guide them through the process of determining if they might have a disability or requesting different accommodations. And she and her colleagues also offer individualized coaching services as well as programs and workshops to educate our entire community on disability awareness and accessibility.

If you have ever thought anything like, "I'm not functioning as well as I think I could," or "I used to be able to manage my fill-in-the-blank condition a lot better in the past, but med school is a whole different beast and I'm struggling." Then maybe Ms. Levi and the office of ESDS (Educational Support and Disability Services) should be on your radar.

We'll have a link to her office and how to start the process for requesting an accommodation in the show notes. I first asked her to tell us a little bit about herself.

Deborah Levi: Sure. So my name is Deborah Levi and I go by she/her/hers pronouns. So by trade, I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker with the state of Maryland, but also back in the day, I earned a second Master's degree in Adult Learning and Leadership.

And I've always had a passion working with students, to have a successful and happy tenure in their institutions. So on campus, I am the Director of Educational Support and Disability Services. I've been here at UMB for almost 11 years. It'll be 11, this September. And over 20 years in higher ed at various institutions.

A little bit more about me: I am a native Baltimorean. I used to live in the city with my family right before the pandemic, and now we're in Baltimore County, but still I'm a city lover and a foodie at heart. I'm a proud wife and mother of two young boys and a silly boxer mix named Winnie.

NF: I love it. We could talk about food, parenting of boys, and dogs for hours. What are some of your favorite restaurants in the area?

DL: Oh my goodness. So you can't go wrong with Hersh's. Not really in the city, but I really enjoy going to Peerce's, but it's a bit of a drive. But a beautiful garden. Amazing food. It is delicious, delicious Indian.

NF: I'd love to learn more about the Office of Educational Support and Disability Services. So what are the types of things that you all do at UMB?

DL: Absolutely. And thank you for having me here, I should say. So first and foremost, we'll call the Office of Educational Support and Disability Services, ESDS. It works with students with disabilities to receive accommodations based on their condition.

It's important to know that we're centralized. So that means we work with students from all seven schools at UMB. In addition to academic accommodations, we do serve all UMB students by offering individual academic coaching services, providing workshops, programs and trainings around disability awareness and educational support items just to make students be more mindful of how they learn and how to study.

NF: So you mentioned disability, which is a central part of the work that you do. Can you define disability for us?

DL: Absolutely. Sometimes disability is a loaded word. And so let's break it down a little bit, especially for our medical students. Okay, we're not talking medical here. Disability is a legal term in terms of our office.

So ESDS is an office that is centralized around the ADA. The ADA is the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was signed into law in 1990. And it prohibits the discrimination of those with disability. Now, the ADA defines a person with a disability who has a condition that substantially limits one or more life activities, for example, walking or breathing or working. Now in 2008 an amendment was added to the ADA to broaden the scope of that definition. So it's not necessarily just those with maybe sensory or motor conditions, but conditions that may impact learning and processing.

NF: So it really became much more expansive and inclusive more recently.

DL: Absolutely. Yes. So my suggestion is when we go into talking about our office, just if you wonder if your condition falls under the ADA, I encourage you to reach out to this office and we can do a deeper dive together versus "I'm not sure and therefore I should not reach out to them." You should definitely reach out to us and we'll work on it.

NF: I love that. That's wonderful. So if you're wondering, just ask. So kind of along those exact lines, what are just some of the reasons why students may need to request accommodations? I can imagine there are so many, but if you can share some examples that might help get our brains in the right place.

DL: Absolutely. So, you know, if you were diagnosed with a learning difference or otherwise known as a learning disability, if you have ADHD, if you have mental health diagnoses, if you have a chronic condition that you need to manage in addition to your experience and work here as a student.

And also what's important is if you have to take medication that may impact how you think, feel, process and work on a day to day basis, that is something to consider. And that would be a reason why you would come and talk to us.

NF: So again, I'm getting the impression that it's really quite broad and really anything that affects your ability to function as well as you feel you should, or as well as you maybe once did, or in comparison to those around you. Anything that impacts your ability to function.

DL: Absolutely. And all your listeners may be thinking and listening, "I wonder if, if I didn't have X, I would be as productive as my peers." Well, if you're thinking that, come talk to us.

NF: What are some examples of actual accommodations that students can request?

DL: Sure. Before I just give you some examples, it's important to know that accommodations are strictly case by case. So student A and student B may have the same diagnosis. But it may impact them differently. And therefore we really try to strive to give each student equity and not an advantage. So with that said, after you go through our process, examples could be ranging from getting a closer parking spot to your building to having some extensions on times whether it's exams or assignments note taking supports, or being able to leave the classroom or rotation when necessary to take care of a medical.

NF: In your experience. What are some reasons why students may feel reluctant to request accommodations? Maybe they may think to themselves, "Well, maybe, but I'm just not gonna ask." What barriers can we try to overcome together?

DL: Yeah, I think we're talking about stigma, right? Look, we all know medical school is tough and competitive, and I think that would be a reason why students are a little shy to reach out for assistance. And maybe they think, "if I need an accommodation, therefore I can't be a really great doctor." That is not the case.

Our goal here is to make sure that you are able to complete your education fully with the supports that you need so that you can be a wonderful and successful and healthy, competent physician. Another idea that you may want to consider is a lot of times students receive diagnoses, maybe an undergrad or in high school, and they think they don't need it anymore.

Well, I assure you, this is a pitfall where students then come back and say, "oh, I wish I reached out." So keep in mind, the content of medical school is quite complex and difficult. So all the

more reason to have all the tools under your belt, including accommodations, if and when needed.

NF: You know what you're saying really, really resonates because when I was working full time in the Office of Student Affairs, I can't count the number of students I worked with who said, "I was always able to compensate and do okay in high school and college, like it's never been a problem before," or "I could always overcome it," but you're absolutely right. Med school - and then beyond that, residency training and what comes afterwards - is really enough to say, okay, we need to address this so that I can function and thrive and be my best self.

DL: Absolutely. And I may wanna add that, unfortunately, we can't go back and retroactively give students extra time on an exam that they didn't do well in. We just can't. So the message would be to please reach out ahead of time so that you have accommodations in place - in this example, extended time - so you can do your best at the front end and be as successful as you can be.

NF: Well, it's like, you read my mind with my next question, which was going to be what words of reassurance can we offer our students to let them know that it's okay to need and request an accommodation?

DL: Yeah. So, you know, accommodations or disabilities are conditions that affect life. I personally utilize transcription services on every Zoom and captions on every TV in my house. Does that mean I'm not competent in my work? Absolutely not. You know, those living with conditions and disabilities happen to be a welcome and inviting group.

We are inviting new people to this group every single day. Some of these conditions or let's call them impairments are due to natural progression, and some of them are genetic, and some of them are situational or environmental. All of that is okay. It's important to know, or at least for our medical students to know, that 12% of students in post-baccalaureate programs, Masters, and graduate programs live with a condition that would be considered a disability. So if no one needed accommodations, this office wouldn't exist. And I assure you we exist!

So I'm happy to share that I think the stigma around accommodations has seemed to go down a bit since the time that I started here. We used to have caseloads of about 250 students. And right now we're at about 400 students that we serve each semester and then some. So I encourage students to reach out to us. It's also important to mention that since we're a centralized office, any medical documentation that we need to substantiate a condition stays in this office.

NF: Can we walk through the process of requesting an accommodation. So now, you know, a student is listening to us, they've been wondering, they feel empowered to come and ask. What are the actual kind of nitty gritty, nuts and bolts, so we can kind of demystify the process a bit.

DL: Yep. Absolutely. So the first thing you do is say, I think I may have a condition that would qualify me for an accommodation. I think this issue is a barrier for my experience here. So you go to the ESDS website and on the homepage, there is a button that says "Request an Accommodation." You then go into a portal. You give us all of your information, explaining the condition, how it impacts you, what you're hoping to receive.

That's basically our jump off point to get to know you. Because otherwise we don't know who's out there. Right. The second piece is providing this office and only this office the medical or psychological documentation that is needed, and you may send it via email or you're welcome to upload it from the request form that you submit on the web.

And last, but most importantly, we actually meet with each individual student to get to know them better, to understand their story, to understand the barriers, to have equity. We can have these appointments over Zoom or face to face. No problem. So once it's complete the ESDS Office connects with the student to determine what we believe to be reasonable accommodations.

And then we send that drafted letter - that does not have your condition on the letter, but only voices the accommodations - to a liaison in each school. And in your case, that is Dr. Lacap. She reviews the accommodations that we're requesting based on the technical standards of the program. Not based on convenience or "I don't wanna do this." It's really clear that it has to do with the program. If she approves it, we move on. If it doesn't work, we will modify it. And last, we will then have the student receive the letter in their inbox and they are welcome to share it with whomever, including their instructors.

And then you would work with ESDS, your school and the instructor to coordinate the appropriate accommodation. May I also add it's really important for me to share that accommodations do not roll over by semester. So what does that mean? You do not need to meet with us again on an individual basis, unless you want to, where something has come up. You do not need to give us new documentation unless there's something new or evolving that you need to share.

But what you do need to do is submit that online every semester because the accommodations need to be related to the courses you're taking that semester. So again, they do not roll over and they're not retroactive. I will also say that if something's not working, come back to us and we're happy to modify and reconsider different accommodations.

NF: I'm walking away with a few really key pieces based on what you just described about the process. One is that starting it is extremely convenient. It's literally a link on your website.

Number two, is that any documentation of the condition really goes to you and only you, and it does not go to the School of Medicine. It does not go to the Office of Student Affairs. It doesn't go to any one of the students, professors, so that all stays private. And even to the point where

your evaluation goes to Dr. Lacap, she also doesn't see any of the medical documentation behind it. She just sees your recommendation. Is that accurate?

DL: That is accurate. It's important to share that if an accommodation or situation is unique or complex I would share the condition with the understanding to make an accommodation work or to further explain why the accommodation is necessary. But we really try to keep that information as close to the chest as possible to protect the student as well as protect the school.

NF: Absolutely. And then I also love that you meet individually with every single student. I love how you said to understand their story, to understand their full humanity as a person who happens to be a medical student.

And then also the really valuable pearl of you do need to resubmit your request each semester. But if nothing has changed in documentation, that's okay. You just are saying, "given my current course load, I still would like to request this accommodation."

DL: Correct.

NF: When would be the right time, the best time, you know, essentially *when* should a student go through this process.

DL: So the best time is prior to a semester starting. So any incoming students out there, please meet up with us, submit your request over the summer now. So we can have time to go through the process. It takes a little, that's a couple steps. It takes some time. With that all said, you can submit at any time. So if you are struggling and decided not to request accommodations on the front end, but then realize you really need it, don't hesitate. Come reach out to us. The only indicator is it may not be able to be implemented immediately.

NF: I have learned a lot from this conversation already. What would you say your parting words of advice for all of our students would be?

DL: Oh, I have so much, but if you wanna talk, shop, come talk to us at any time and join us for academic coaching.

But the major takeaway I would say is to be proactive and be communicative. Don't suffer in silence. Talk to your school. Talk to us, talk to your instructors. And the other piece I would say is just remember you and the instructors are on the same team so that you can learn and absorb the content of your courses so you can be successful physicians. We are not trying to trick you or make a battle, just come out with what's going on and so that we can work together and collaboratively to have you be as successful as you may.

NF: Well, Ms. Deborah Levi, Deborah, thank you so much for this conversation. I've enjoyed it tremendously. And I really think our students are going to get a lot out of it.

DL: My pleasure. Happy to be here. And please join us! Say hello, students!