

ACCESS supports students of all abilities at SIUE

Madelaine Deardeuff: For the Intelligencer

Published Thursday, February 28, 2019



Photo: Courtesy Of SIUE

Dominic Dorsey, director of ACCESS, the office formerly known as SIUE Disability Support Services.

EDWARDSVILLE — Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's office for Accessible Campus Community & Equitable Student Support (ACCESS) is dedicated to providing reasonable and co-curricular accommodations to diverse learners with major life impairments.

On this week's episode of Segue, SIUE's premier radio show that discusses the lives and work of the people on campus and beyond, host Randy Pembrook, PhD, SIUE Chancellor, interviews Dominic Dorsey, director of ACCESS, the office formerly known as Disability Support Services.

This episode will air at 9 a.m. Sunday, March 3 on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound and siue.edu/wsie.

Dorsey joined SIUE in January 2018 after serving at Indiana University Purdue University-Indianapolis (IUPUI). He received his bachelor's in communication studies in 2009 from IUPUI and received his master's in higher education and student affairs in 2011 from Indiana University. He also earned a certification in behavior analysis from the University of Cincinnati.

Throughout his entire professional career, Dorsey has worked with students with disabilities with a mission of shifting from ideas of limitations to solutions in accessibility.

"Welcome to Segue, Dominic! It's great to have you as a champion for our SIUE students," Chancellor Pembrook said. "What initially sparked your interest in disability services?"

"I have always had a role as an advocate and activist for others," Dorsey said. "My career actually began as a student leader on campus, particularly as I was involved in numerous causes as president of the Black Student Union, working with coalitions with the Latino Student Union, Gay-Straight Alliance and other groups.

"I had a strong sense of wanting to be on the right side of history and naively hoping to become a voice for the voiceless. Pam King, the director of Adaptive Educational Services at IUPUI, sent out one of her students to the courtyard and told me that she wanted to offer a job to me."

“I don’t want to assert that individuals should aspire to be a voice for the voiceless, when in truth we should seek to listen to those most marginalized and use our privilege to amplify their voice, not replace it,” Dorsey said.

King noticed Dorsey’s continuous advocacy for his fellow students and proposed a position where the young man could advocate for students with disabilities. His new mentor noted that civil rights was an important cause, but also explained that many of the conversations of civil rights frequently excluded people with disabilities.

“She told me, ‘I need your voice and passion for students in my office,’ so, I took the job,” Dorsey says.

Dorsey worked in the IUPUI office as a student worker, graduate student, program assistant and eventually reached the position of assistant director.

With a large number of students on campus at SIUE, Dorsey encounters individuals that might have a wide array of challenges navigating the educational process, such as vision and hearing, mobility, attention deficit disorder and other issues.

“What does ACCESS do for those individuals, particularly within the aspects of accommodations and creating an educational environment where students can succeed?” Pembroke asked.

“Our office does not look at one-time solutions,” Dorsey said. “We want to prepare our students to be successful once they graduate. We want to look at how we can eliminate barriers and help them become as self-sufficient as possible.

“One of the first things I did when I joined SIUE was eliminate this innate desire to have boilerplate solutions. We look at each student as an individual and situation from an interactive perspective. Each situation will be different and we want the opportunity to think outside of the box for what accommodations are available but still stay within the parameters of what is reasonable on a student-by-student basis.

“ACCESS assists students by looking at their academic paths, understanding the abilities and technical standards required for that particular field or course, how the individual’s diagnosis affects them, and help them become successful in a way that does not circumvent or fundamentally alter the course’s curriculum.”

“I hear you talking a lot about learning strategies and effective ways to prepare instead of dealing with some of the things we’ve traditionally known as disabilities,” Pembroke said. “Do you rely on those with a background in learning psychology and cognitive strategies, or is that part of your training?”

“First and foremost, I’m a lifelong learner. I’m also the first to admit that I don’t know everything but I surround myself with individuals that do,” Dorsey said. “Within our office, we approach things from a case management perspective. We also look at teaching pedagogies and learning designs overall.

“My goal is to ensure that accessibility is a campus-wide perspective and an ideology that we all can adopt. Faculty members should look at their own toolkits, recognize their own able-bodied privilege and know that they will have students with disabilities come into their classes who need assistance. Instead of making those students an afterthought, we want to ensure that classes will not marginalize students.

“For students who have autism spectrum disorders, issues with social interaction might occur if the student is required to engage in group work. Students with anxiety might struggle in participation-based activities. If a grade for participation is conducted, ACCESS wants to ensure that those students will not be penalized for not being able to muster the courage to interact or engage.”

“It’s a collaborative work between our office, the students and the faculty to ensure that our students don’t enter a situation where they are doomed to fail,” Dorsey said.

ACCESS proudly serves as a liaison between students and faculty members that can help figure out what solutions could be possible within each course.

To ensure that ACCESS will continue to provide accommodations and equal opportunity to students of all abilities, the SIU Board of Trustees recently approved \$535,000 in renovations to ACCESS. The updates will help the office accommodate the more than 700 students who require assistance for testing services and will also renovate its smart seminar room and computer lab space. Renovations include adding a new conference room, increasing testing stations from 10 to 23, including three isolated, quiet testing rooms and installing new audio/visual equipment for the conference room and to monitor the testing areas.

Tune in to Pembroke and Dorsey’s entire conversation at 9 a.m. this Sunday, March 3, on WISE 88.7 FM the Sound and siue.edu/wsie.