



Lifting Students Higher

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The Savior Jesus Christ was sent to earth to minister and save all mankind. During His mortal ministry, His focus was always on “reaching the one.” He had the ability to see beyond human imperfections and frailties and looked upon the heart to see the potential of those He ministered to. Part of the mission here at BYU–Idaho is to provide a quality education for students of diverse interests and abilities. “Our discipleship includes the sacred responsibility to follow His example of reaching out and loving those with disabilities.”

I would like to approach this article based on my experience working in the Disability Services Office at BYU–Idaho. Thus, my perspective will be based on experiences and the lessons learned from working with students that have varying abilities and disabilities. One of those experiences occurred during the Winter 2013 semester while meeting with a first semester freshman that had been diagnosed with a significant learning and processing disorder. It was then that I was reminded of how important and essential it is for each of us to follow the Savior’s example of “Reaching the One” in our respective areas of influence.

As I listened to this student tell his story and explain his current challenges, I could immediately sense his heart

felt plea for sincere help and it became clear that I was in a position to really make a difference in this student’s life. Here was a student who was feeling vulnerable, lost, and without hope. As I continued to listen to what he was sharing, I saw tears well up in his eyes and with a discouraged voice say, “I guess college is just not for me. School has always been so hard and I am ready to quit and go home because this is not going to work.”

As I reflected on what this student had just shared with me and how devastated and hopeless he felt, I found myself thinking, “What can I possibly offer this student that would give him hope and at the same time not set him up for another failure?” I had a couple of choices to consider. I could offer some of the common and even somewhat generic academic accommodations that I had given to other students in similar circumstances, or I could really take the time to listen and understand what barriers were prohibiting this new student from having a positive experience academically.

As I took the time to ask a few more questions and dig a little deeper into this student’s situation, we were able to identify some of the barriers that were preventing him from being successful academically. We were able to provide him with some tools that fostered a more realistic and achievable accommodation plan. We also identified what resources could be made available to provide additional support along the way. As we discussed the details of what could be offered to him, I noticed a difference in the way he responded to what I was saying and, for the first time during our conversation I saw him seem somewhat excited to give it a try and not quit school altogether.

For the next several weeks I asked this student to check in with me and give me an update on how things were going, and together we assessed his needs to see if there were other challenges that he was having in the academic setting. Each time he came in, he was excited to share a success he had experienced in his learning responsibilities that week. His confidence in his abilities increased, and he was performing well and meeting the standards and expectations in his course work. This student is on track to graduate in the Spring of 2017 and currently maintains a 3.941 GPA.

As I have reflected on the life changing experience that occurred with this particular student and many other students that I have worked with, I have come to realize that there are four principles that if followed, can lead to similar experiences for each of us as we love and serve the “one” here at BYU–Idaho.

If a student hesitates or even stops explaining something, focus more intently as this may be the most critical issue or piece of information that is needed in order to better help them.

LISTEN FOR WHAT’S NOT BEING SAID

With limited time and resources at our disposal, and the ever growing needs of the diverse student population we serve, we may find ourselves in situations such as mine where we ask ourselves, how can I possibly help this student? What can I offer that will be of benefit? When that happens listen, for what’s not being said by the student. “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.” Part of listening to understand requires us to be quiet and not think of what we will say next. Sometimes students may be afraid to express how they really feel and may not have the words or emotional self-awareness to do so. If a student hesitates or even stops explaining something, focus more intently as this may be the most critical issue or piece of information that is needed in order to better help them. Listen to the underlying issues and be aware of any emotional cues that tell us there may be something more that is not being said. Part of listening for what’s not being said will require us to be patient, kind, approachable, non-judgmental, and

supportive. Being aware of our responses back to the student is also important as it will likely reinforce feelings they may already be experiencing.

REMOVE BARRIERS

Not all disabilities are created equal. Avoiding stereotypes and setting aside our personal biases will help us to begin to identify what barriers exist for an individual student. As we undertake to reach the one, we should remember the counsel of the Lord to Samuel, as he was sent to the house of Jesse to find the one who should reign over Israel. The Lord said to Samuel, “Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature,... for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.” Many students experience hidden or unseen disabilities which can further impede our ability to know what challenges and barriers are present. Asking students what they are most concerned about, as it relates to their learning style and abilities, will be important. As we explore options and solutions together with them, we can ensure that the fundamental elements of the student’s learning experience and expectations will not be lowered but maintained. An essential and even life changing way in which we can remove barriers is by providing and allowing for reasonable accommodations to take place in the learning environment. Depending on the disability, students may need to have access to note takers, sign language interpreters, readers, scribes, or to use assistive technologies as a way to work around certain barriers. These types of accommodations can be the key to allowing students with disabilities the opportunity to find equal access in the academic setting.

KEEP HIGH STANDARDS AND DON’T LOWER EXPECTATIONS

Often I hear students say that they don’t want to be treated differently. They are so determined to be successful and prove to themselves and others that they can meet the demands and expectations that are placed upon them. As high standards and expectations are maintained and appropriate support systems are put into place, students’ self-confidence will increase. President Clark G. Gilbert reminds us of this important principle when he said,

Some of you may mistakenly interpret my earlier counsel to build confidence through early wins as an acquiescence of our higher standards as a university for academic performance and personal achievement. Nothing could be further from the truth. Part of helping everyday students achieve extraordinary results is letting them know that we expect the very best from each of them. Builders of people know the importance of holding high standards and then providing the initial scaffolding and eventually the trust to help students reach for a higher place.

Sometimes we may have a tendency to lower a standard or expectation or even focus on what students can't do rather than what they are capable of doing when given the right tools to succeed. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, "All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement." No matter what the disability, maintain the standard, but take time to reassure, encourage, and create opportunities for success as stepping stones for even greater academic achievements. Some students may not see their academic potential because their disability or weaknesses have clouded their vision of what they truly are capable of.

NURTURE AND FOLLOW UP

In His parable of the lost sheep, the Savior teaches us this important principle when He said, "What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?" Students with disabilities may be feeling completely overwhelmed, underprepared and even lost as they start their college experience. Often students have shared with me their fear of failure and worries of not being able to keep up and perform at the level necessary to attain a college degree. Be the one who believes in them and makes extra time to listen to their challenges and concerns. Follow up with them often. Don't do this because you have to, but, rather, because you want to see them succeed and have a wonderful experience. Let us remember the counsel given to the employees of BYU–Idaho by President Gordon B. Hinckley when he said, "Help these young people. I know you do. But reach a little lower to lift them a little higher.

Be kind and generous and helpful and patient and encouraging."

As students begin to feel that you truly care and have their best interest at heart, their motivation and outlook will change and their self-confidence can begin to grow in ways that they have never experienced. Each of us as employees of BYU–Idaho can "reach the one" as we pattern our lives after the master teacher, even the Savior Jesus Christ. As we follow his perfect example, each of us will be blessed to have life changing experiences with the students we serve.

For additional information and faculty resources visit <http://www.byui.edu/disabilities>

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