UL follows ‘case-by-case’ basis for mental illness, offers resources

John Roman
CONTENT AND WEB MANAGER

The University of Louisiana at Lafayette has put in work to accommodate its students struggling with their mental health, and they offer more than what students may expect.

According to Director of the Office of Disability Services Carol Landry, Ph.D., there are 1025 students who receive accommodations for a disability from UL Lafayette, and those with an emotional disability — anxiety, depression, OCD, etc. — make up the second largest percentage of that overall 1025.

221 students receive accommodations for an emotional disability as a primary disability, that is to say, the most serious or most severe diagnosis. 301 other students also receive accommodations for an emotional disability as a secondary disability.

Landry, along with the other members of the office, works to see what each individual student requesting accommodations needs; the Office and its accommodations focus more on “leveling the playing field” than dishing out preordained accommodations based on the student’s disability alone.

“There’s no such thing as a cookie-cutter set of accommodations,” Landry said. “It’s always case-by-case because I could have 10 individuals sitting in front of me and they all have the same diagnosis of depression, but they all need something different because we’re different as people.”

Landry went on to list a few examples of what students with different mental health issues might need. For example, a student with depression might have trouble taking notes in class because their thinking might be slowed, so the office might provide a note taker with them.

Landry’s example of what is a reasonable and appropriate accommodation is so: if a student has a disability that impairs how they compute math, they might request a calculator on all tests with a math requirement. She said this wouldn’t always be appropriate, however, it would have to depend on what the test is designed to be testing.

Students who think they might need some sort of accommodations can begin the process by going to the Office of Disability Services’ website and filling out a form there. The only requirement is that they have some form of documentation or testing that can attest to what they might need, but Landry said that isn’t necessary if the student may be on the fence.

“If they’re just not sure or they’re just looking for some direction, they don’t have to go through this process,” Landry said. “They are welcome at any time to come into my office or my assistant director will talk with them.”

The Office isn’t the only thing the university offers to students with mental health issues. The on-campus Counseling and Testing Center will also provide students with free counseling on whatever may be troubling them.

Victoria Thomas is a provisionally licensed professional counselor with the Center, and, although she has only had that position since the beginning of January, she has worked with them both in undergrad as a student worker and in graduate school with an assistantship.

The Center is available to students, faculty and staff during the weekdays, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., except for on Friday during which they close at 12:30 p.m. The center does take walk-in clients, and, according to Thomas, if they cannot fit the client into the day’s schedule then it is possible to schedule them in for one of the following days.

Thomas explained how, although the center cannot directly provide any accommodations, they can help the student find those accommodations they may need by working with other offices around campus.

“What we do is we work very well with the other departments on campus, especially the Office of Disability Services, to get the student whatever they need to where they can be successful here,” Thomas said.

“So we really want students to be successful, to have the college experience that they want, so if they come to us and they’re struggling, we can provide supporting documentation whether it’s a letter or anything else they might need,” she continued.

The counselors are also available on call. If a student might feel that they are in a crisis, they can call ULPD, who will then notify a counselor to go to the student and ensure that they are safe.

As far as how the university handles mental health and its students, one professor, Mike McDermott, Ph.D., described how most significant improvement that could be made would be to students’ awareness of what is offered to them.

“As far as the policies that are in place and the Office of Disability Services, I think they do a great job; I think they are aware of those types of problems,” McDermott said.

“If there’s anything that could be improved it wouldn’t necessarily be on whether the accommodations are available, but getting access to the students or increasing awareness for students who might be experiencing some difficulties, providing those types of opportunities,” he continued.

Landry and Thomas echoed this sentiment, saying there are too many students who might not be aware of what resources are available to them, be they the Office of Disability Services, the Counseling and Testing Center, or even just their professors and classmates.

“There’s a lot more resources available that students might not be aware of, and I think if they reach out to their fellow students or their professors or even us, they’d be surprised at the amount of help and support that they can get,” Thomas said.

“I think we all struggle at some point with something in our lives, the opportunity of reaching out and finding the people, whether that’s counseling and testing or just other people around you, I think that’s the most important thing.”