May 30, 2009

TO: Karen Sprague, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies
    Undergraduate Council

FROM: Hilary Gerdes, Senior Director, Disability Services

RE: Changing the Name of Disability Services

I am writing to request a name change from Disability Services to Center for Accessible Education and Community. The current name no longer accurately reflects the range of programs, services, and support we offer, and is quickly becoming outdated. Center for Accessible Education and Community better positions us for the future, is more inclusive, forward thinking, community oriented, and representative of our current role. We would join Harvard and Stanford with using the term Accessible Education to represent the program that facilitates equal access opportunities for and with students who have disabilities.

UO Disability Services has been at the forefront in Oregon, and nationally, in incorporating principles of Universal Design into its policies, practices, and procedures, and embraces a paradigm shift from a medical model of disability to one that fosters a more shared sense of responsibility and commitment. We are part of an exciting cultural change that incorporates an inclusive approach to structuring educational, social, and community environments aimed at providing access in a way that reduces the need for individual accommodations for students with disabilities. Originating from the field of architecture, Universal Design recognizes disability and the definition of “ableness” as the interaction between individual and environment (social, educational, physical, etc...).

When discussing this proposal we were encouraged by the congruence with this aspect of the UO Mission statement: “…the university strives to enrich the public that sustains it through the acceptance of the challenge of an evolving social, political, and technological environment by welcoming and guiding change rather than reacting to it.”

- The name Accessible Education shifts the focus from an individual’s “impairment” (disability) to one that reinforces our collective goal of educating students, and supporting faculty in their role to make the educational process and curriculum more accessible to everyone. It also recognizes that all of us share responsibility to make the curricular, informational, physical, and social environments at the university more useable, sustainable, and accessible. This change in name better reflects our shift from an office that traditionally has been perceived as a “special office” that fixes students’ “problems” to one that supports students and faculty/staff engagement in creating learning environments where students can actively participate in all facets of the campus community. We anticipate more students being comfortable approaching an office with this name. This will likely be particularly true for students with non-apparent disabilities, and student veterans. Many student veterans are dealing with significant disabilities, but perceive themselves as wounded warriors, not as having a disability.
The term “Center” reflects that we are the central entity working with disability related issues for students, and both students and faculty utilize us as a resource for a range of research and program initiatives. Currently Disability Services is involved in a three-year federal grant. Members of our staff have presented at national and regional conferences, hosted national webinars, participated in international professional exchanges, etc... Particularly through adaptive technology and sign language interpreter coordination there is significant involvement with both public and employee accommodation support.

Using “Community” in addition to “Accessible Education” is important to represent ongoing engagement in many issues and initiatives outside of the classroom setting. We work with undergraduates and graduates, American English Institute students, prospective students, Community Education students, parents, summer only students, and international students. We are actively involved in the campus planning/construction process, work closely with University Housing, ASUO, Office of Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity, Academic Learning Services, Knight Libraries, Natural History Museum, Art Museum, Student Recreation Center, Graduate School, Academic Advising, OMAS, OSL, and many others around issues of inclusiveness and access. Most recently, our Sign Language Interpreter Coordinator was instrumental in collaborating with the Theatre dept. to provide ASL interpreted theatre productions.

We are an important resource in the larger Eugene/Springfield area as well, with a history of involvement with LTD, LCC, Eugene City Parks and Recreation, 4-J School District, Human Rights Commission, and local advocacy groups. The 4J school district and other community entities consult with our Adaptive Technology Adviser on a regular basis. We also have strong connections with the Oregon Commission for the Blind, and Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation.

To insure that the Center can be easily found and recognized we plan to incorporate a note of explanation or a byline along with the office name for easier identification. During a time of transition, we would cross list the new name with the old name in directories, and include a clarifying statement in publications when needed.

Thank you for your consideration. Please let me know if any additional information or clarification would be helpful.