

UW Oshkosh's Project Success under new leadership

by Derek Paulus - Tuesday, March 05, 2013

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Today's educational system emphasizes the ability to write long essays, read pages upon pages from textbooks and always use proper spelling and grammar, an expectation challenging enough for many students but even more challenging for students who struggle specifically with language-based learning. The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh's Project Success program, under the new direction of Karen Schmidt, seeks to assist these students to achieve their goals.

Founded by Robert T. Nash in 1979, Project Success first served only six students before growing into the program it is today, employing more than 40 tutors who assist roughly 320 University students annually. The program provides a unique approach to help students overcome language-based learning disabilities, the most common being dyslexia.

Dyslexia is an often times hereditary disorder brought about by a differing structure in the left hemisphere of the brain, causing difficulties for individuals to properly develop reading and language skills. It affects 15 to 20 percent of the population with average or above-average intelligence, a group that Schmidt said is often unclear why they struggle to read, write or spell, sometimes leading to mental health issues like anxiety or depression.

"I'm so inspired to be able to serve this population who has kind of been met by obstacles and people who didn't believe in them," said Schmidt.

Schmidt, appointed director in December, earned both her undergraduate and graduate degrees from UW Oshkosh—a bachelor's degree in special education in 1992 and a master's degree in professional counseling in 2008.

Prior to working at the University, Schmidt taught special education for the Oshkosh Area School District. She returned to UW Oshkosh to work as a campus minister, making referrals to the University's Counseling Center until the frequency of referrals prompted her to earn her master's at UW Oshkosh and start her private practice counseling service.

It was during this time that Schmidt came to know William Kitz, currently the director emeritus of Project Success, who helped her provide services specifically to people with dyslexia.

"Although she did not have any formal training in dyslexia, she was a very quick learner on the subject and began to take a keen interest in the special counseling needs of people with dyslexia," Kitz said.

The two teamed up to provide several workshops about dyslexia for the community, educating them on the basics of dyslexia and the social issues associated with the disorder.

Schmidt was also the director of the Learning Center at the Wisconsin Institute for Learning Disabilities

and Dyslexia (WILDD) from 2009-2010. The co-founder of WILDD and former Project Success student, Ervin Carpenter, provided Schmidt with the language remediation training he learned when he was a student, which continues to help people with dyslexia become language independent.

“As part of her training process she worked with one of our students who has severe dyslexia,” Kitz said. “I observed her during some of her sessions with this student and I was impressed with her skill in carrying out the instruction. She has excellent technical skills in providing effective instruction to remediate skill deficits.”

Project Success’ use of a remedial teaching model is something Schmidt said makes UW Oshkosh’s program distinct. The program teaches students a multisensory phonics approach for reading and spelling, utilizing three senses—visual, auditory and kinesthetic-tactile, or hands-on work. In taking this approach, students begin to become more academically independent within a handful of months rather than simply compensating for their disorder. This approach has attracted students from around the globe to UW Oshkosh.

“We have students... that know Project Success because they can actually be recognized for their intelligence and don’t feel like they can’t succeed. They can succeed,” Schmidt said.

Kinesiology student Kaitlyn Terpening works with Project Success and said the program provides “a good working environment for students.”

Several students like Terpening work within the Project Success office copying notes, answering phones and helping to tutor students.

Though UW Oshkosh provides high quality assistance to these struggling students, Schmidt said their struggles are something that needs to be addressed early in their education so they don't slip through the cracks.

Schmidt shared the story of a straight-A student whose high school principal told her she shouldn't even attempt to enroll in college because of her disability. After hearing about Project Success, she came to visit UW Oshkosh and meet with Schmidt about how she could succeed despite her disorder.

“There’s that resiliency, that fighter energy, that’s in the students at the University,” Schmidt said. “They’re quite the role models for the other 15 to 20 percent of the population who gave up along the way. So it’s inspiring and it makes me want to get our students out there in the public schools or in private schools to the younger students and say, ‘Don’t give up. Look what’s possible. Here’s Project Success. Believe in yourself.’”

Schmidt is looking ahead to the future of the program and said she is hoping for more coordination between Project Success and other programs doing similar work.

“I’m hoping to work more with the other disciplines on campus,” she said. “Imagine Project Success and the counseling department and the Education department and all of us working together to change the way that education happens for this group of people... so that they don’t have to come out feeling so depleted and just so that across the nation we can make a statement. We have Project Success, a

Counseling Center and special education. We have it all right under one roof.”

Project Success will be hosting an open house April 13 in Nursing and Education 26 at 1:30 p.m., with a campus tour available at 10:30 a.m. Those interested in visiting can contact the Admission’s Office at (920) 424-3164 to sign up, though registration is not required.

Learn more:

- [Project Success and UW Oshkosh](#)