

Mizzou Weekly

Nov. 4, 2010 Volume 32, No. 11

Advocates renew commitment to improving ‘disability culture’ at MU



SUPPORT SYSTEM Barbara Willis, with her medical alert dog Sydney, is coordinator of the civic leaders internship program in the Office of Service Learning. Rob Hill photo

RETHINKING DISABILITY

Reducing barriers by changing attitudes

Editor's Note: This story has been modified since it was originally published to clarify that the Office of Service Learning has done everything necessary to accommodate staff and students with disabilities.

Barbara Willis has experienced the University of Missouri from two perspectives — as a student and as a staff member.

As a student, Willis, who has a closed-head injury that causes migraines so severe they can cause temporary blindness, had “remarkable” support from MU’s Office of Disability Services. As a MU staff member, Willis, coordinator of the civic leaders internship program in the Office of Service Learning, stressed that she enjoys the full support of her department and her supervisors, whom she says have “gone above and beyond in supporting my employment.” But she said that, as an institution, MU can do more to offer the same level of support to employees that it does to students.

“I never had to prove my disability to the professors who controlled my grade,” says Willis, who relies on a specially trained service dog named Sydney to sniff out oncoming migraines. “But now I have to prove my disability and ask for accommodations from the same people that write my performance reviews.

“Jobs are hard enough to come by,” she continues. “And when you have a disability, it just feels like another obstacle to overcome.”

In a 2009 survey of faculty and staff by the Chancellor’s Committee for Persons with Disabilities, 15 percent of 1,144 respondents reported having a disability. The survey’s results suggested that, for people with disabilities, the “experience of acceptance and accessibility on campus is not as positive as their peers without disability.” Moreover, only 20 percent of those who took the survey said they felt the university effectively responded to complaints about discrimination or problems on the job.

Disability advocates at MU want to change that by creating a centralized office that would offer direct support and assistance to employees with disabilities. That effort, led by the 21-member chancellor’s committee, has not yet led to a formal proposal to campus administrators. But Barbara Hammer, director of the Office of Disability Services, said the support model that’s worked so well for students should be extended to MU employees.

“As it stands right now,” Hammer says, “if a student comes to my office and needs assistance with completing coursework while managing a disability, I have a staff and a budget to help them.”

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities who need those accommodations to perform their duties. Lee Henson, MU’s ADA coordinator, says the university has made significant improvements to building accessibility and in supporting disability services for students.

When it comes to employees, however, Henson says the current system puts the responsibility for accommodating people with disabilities on individual departments, colleges and divisions. He says a centralized office that took on that role would reduce the burden on individual departments and lower the resistance to hiring people who need accommodation.

“In some cases, the costs are evenly split between the department, the major college or administrative unit and the Office of the Provost,” Henson says.

Cheryl Shigaki, chair of the chancellor’s committee and associate professor of health psychology, wants MU to adopt what’s known as the social model of disability, which is based on the idea that accommodating people with disabilities can benefit everyone. For example, automatic doors at the post office help people with spinal injuries, as well as customers carrying multiple packages. Captioning on the Memorial Stadium scoreboard helps both the deaf and those who simply can’t hear over the roar of the crowd.

“The social model is about creating an environment that allows everyone to coexist without highlighting differences,” Shigaki says.

Shigaki and other advocates are hoping to change “disability culture” through Access Mizzou, which was created in 2004 to make the campus more hospitable for people with disabilities. One of the major goals of the initiative is to increase recruitment and retention of students and employees with disabilities by enhancing MU’s image as an institution committed to integrating people with disabilities into all facets of campus life. The initiative includes a review of campus buildings, programs and activities with an eye toward making them more equitable and usable for everyone. It calls for adopting policies that ensure accessibility not only to campus buildings but also in communications and course design.

Willis says some MU employees with disabilities might be reluctant to discuss accommodations with their supervisors. She says making them feel more comfortable on the job would be a big step in making MU a better, more inclusive place to work.

“When your place of employment goes above and beyond to make you feel welcome — to give you and your boss resources to overcome challenges — it makes you feel like real member of the team,” she says.

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Forsee calls for advisory committee to review retirement plan options

DEFINING BENEFITS

UM might need more time to reach pension decision

University of Missouri President Gary Forsee won't rush a vote by the Board of Curators on changes to the UM retirement plan for future employees, and he called for creation of an advisory committee of faculty and staff to review data compiled by the System's pension consultants.

That data, including a detailed overview of how a defined contribution plan for future employees might work, was presented Monday to the Board of Curators Compensation and Human Resources Committee. Forsee said he wants faculty and staff to have a chance to absorb the new information — an "additional drill-down step" that could delay a decision by curators, who were scheduled to consider recommendations next month.

"We'll make a decision between now and December if we're ready for recommendations to come to the board at that point in time, and if not, why, and what else would need to be done," he said.

Betsy Rodriguez, UM vice president for Human Resources, told curators that faculty and staff harbor "grave concerns" about offering future employees a separate pension plan. They are particularly worried, she said, that switching from the current defined benefit plan, which is managed by the university and guarantees some level of retirement income, to a plan that requires employees to save and invest on their own, known as defined contribution, could lead to reduced benefits for current employees.

Rodriguez said many employees want a "guarantee" that the university will continue to fully fund the existing defined benefit plan and that current employees will not lose retirement income they have been promised.

Curators were given an example of one type of defined contribution plan. Under the model presented, which was based on faculty and staff input, the university would contribute an amount equal to 5 percent of an employee's pay. Hourly workers would be required to contribute 1 percent; salaried workers would contribute 2 percent. Higher employee contributions would be matched by the university. Employees would be vested after three years rather than the current five years, and they could take their individual contributions with them if they left the university.

Such a plan, which has not been proposed, would cost the university about 8 percent of total payroll costs — slightly more than the university budgets annually to pay for the current defined benefits plan. However, under a defined contribution plan, the university's cost would be more predictable from year to year.

"I would grant a slightly higher contribution by the university in exchange for some certainty in the long run," said Curator Warren Erdman, chairman of the compensation committee.

Curators also heard a presentation on challenges faced by public pension plans across the country, as well as an overview of how the System invests its retirement fund. Returns on that investment have been adequate to keep the current plan fully funded. However, they have been lower in recent years, which is why the university asked employees last year to begin making their own contributions to the plan.

Foresee said he would spend the next few weeks meeting with employees on the four campuses to discuss the retirement project, which was launched almost a year ago. On Wednesday, he addressed the issue at a Town Hall meeting at Jesse Auditorium, where he again emphasized that, in choosing a new plan for future employees, the board will seek to minimize any "adverse impact" on the current defined benefit plan.

He acknowledged employee fears that the December target date for curator action on the new plan was “rushing to the finish line.” That’s one reason why he has asked for the creation of a committee to provide additional input to Rodriguez, who has been meeting with groups of employees regularly since the beginning of the year.

Forsee said one question that needs to be answered is how to keep the current plan solvent.

“If we kept the status quo, can we provide assurance that we wouldn’t have to come back five or 10 years from now to employees and ask for more contributions to keep the plan fully funded?” he said. “That probably creates some unease.”

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Event will emphasize clinical research need

AWARE FOR ALL

Volunteers necessary to advance treatment studies

Thanks to volunteers worldwide, clinical research often leads to major advances in medical technology and treatments. However, more volunteers are needed.

To raise awareness about clinical research and its importance, the School of Medicine is sponsoring a free public webcast from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Nov. 6 at the ARC (Activity and Recreation Center) at 1701 W. Ash St. in Columbia.

The event, Aware for All, is the first National Clinical Research Education Day and is sponsored by the Center for Information and Study on Clinical Research Participation (CISCRP).

“There is a real need for education about clinical research, including the risks, benefits and rights of participation,” said Kathy Donovan Hanson, research participant advocate for the School of Medicine and former research coordinator. “I don’t think people are aware of the amount of research that is actually occurring around here, but nationally there are thousands of studies being conducted, and they are important for a number of reasons.”

Hanson is interested in increasing the diversity of research participants. Diseases affect various populations in different ways, she said. For example, most research, especially cardiac research, used to occur in older Caucasian men. However, when it was discovered that women’s heart attack symptoms were not the same as men’s, much of the existing research on treatment was less useful for women of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, she said.

“It is important for science to understand how we all experience illness and how to treat it,” Hanson said.

Locations across the country will be hosting the live webcast. The events will feature information and exhibit areas, and a free lunch. Attendees also can hear stories from patients who have participated in clinical research and become informed about what clinical trials are and how they work; why clinical research is needed; what questions people should ask to their doctor or provider before participating in a clinical trial; and the safety, benefits and risks of clinical research.

To register, call Laura Ward at 882-8957 or e-mail wardla@health.missouri.edu.

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Auction will benefit new scholarship

The School of Social Work will host a fundraising reception and art auction to establish MU's first graduate scholarship in military social work. The event is at 6 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 11, at Orr Street Studios in downtown Columbia.

The theme for the fundraiser is "Helmet Heroes." Army helmets, a symbol of the protection they provide military personnel, will be artistically designed by invited local and regional artists and auctioned at the event. For more information, visit ssw.missouri.edu (<http://ssw.missouri.edu/>).

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Brown bag addresses classroom technology

Today's students can take classes around the world via satellite or can engage with one another via chat rooms on a course website. "Different Places, New Learning Spaces," a brown bag lunch at noon Nov. 9 at S207 Memorial Union, will discuss the 21st-century classroom and its evolution, as well as provide information about the resources that can help support a successful experience for faculty and students.

For more info, call 884-2640 or 882-9547.

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Jarhead author comes to MU

Anthony Swofford, author of *Jarhead*, a critically acclaimed memoir that went on to become a hit movie, will relate his experiences as a modern soldier, writer and teacher at 7 p.m. Nov. 9 in Conservation Auditorium in the Anheuser-Busch Natural Resources Building.

Swofford served as a lance corporal in a U.S. Marine Corps Surveillance and Target Acquisition/Scout-Sniper platoon during the 1991 Gulf War. A reception and book signing will follow his presentation. The event is free.

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The State of Black Mizzou

Every year, MU attracts a more diverse student body, presenting challenges that might not always be apparent. As part of the 18th Annual Black Cultural Awareness Week, a panel of African-American graduate and undergraduate students will talk about their experience at Mizzou.

The presentation, at 7 p.m. Nov. 10 at the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center, will be followed by a question and answer session. Please visit bcc.missouri.edu (<http://bcc.missouri.edu/>) for more information.

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SkillSoft training goes online

The University of Missouri has purchased a three-year contract for SkillSoft, a new online training program that allows employees to acquire personal and professional development on campus.

Online demonstrations will be available twice a day, at 11 a.m. and 2:30 p.m., from Nov. 8 to Nov. 12 at myhr.umsystem.edu/psp/ (<https://myhr.umsystem.edu/psp/prd/?cmd=login&languageCd=ENG&>).

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