

Bard Disability Services Podcast

00:00 Josh: welcome back everybody to our latest podcast. Today, we will be talking about disability services at Bard and how one can go about receiving those services and kind of seeking those out. My name is Josh Tyler, I'm the Assistant Director of Admission. And as usual, I am joined by the Director of Admission, Mackie Siebens. Hey, Mackie!

00:20 Mackie: Hey Josh. Hi everyone, as Josh said, I am Mackie Siebens, Director of Admission, alumna of the college as well. And today we are joined by Erika van der Velden, who is going to speak a little bit about her role here at the college. Erika, do you want to go ahead and introduce yourself?

00:35 Erika: Sure! Hi! Thanks for having me! I am the Director of Accessibility and Disability Resources at Bard. I am an alumna also, I graduated in 2004. And I am new to this position this year, but I've been working for Bard for the last 6 years or so. I've been in the BHSEC, our early college in Cleveland, where I was the Director of Advising and taught psychology and orchestra. So, it's a change but still within the Bard family for sure.

01:06 Josh: Great! Thanks, Erika! Well, our first question is really about what your position entails, as the Director of the Accessibility and Disability Resources?

01:16 Erika: Sure! First of all, I work very closely with student affairs and a lot of what my position is acting as a liaison and collaborating with the Residence Life, with the deans, with faculty, and other offices that provides student support, just to be able to make students' experience at Bard more accessible. So, I help students set up accommodations, whether those are in terms of housing, whether they are about getting around campus, or whether they are academic accommodations for classes. And I also just help students access the support they need in a pretty tailored individualized way.

02:05 Mackie: Thanks, Erika! So, another question we have for you is in your introduction, you mentioned orchestra and psychology and working at the Bard High School Early College in an advisory role, what prompted you to go into this particular role, advising and supporting students, working specifically with disabilities.

02:27 Erika: Disabilities and disability resources is something very close to my heart actually. My own education is in psychology. I have a master's in clinical psychology and spent some serious time in grad school, focusing on the kinds of testing that are done for people with learning disorders, for various mental health conditions. And I took a real interest in that and also the way in which the documentations and evaluation of various disabilities are translated into services. So, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. I have always worked in education and I think my angle as a psychologist helped me to really focus on the individual. And I am really excited to come back to Bard in this role because it just seems like such a great opportunity to help turn these documented disabilities into opportunities for students that actually fit. And when I was at Bard, I was also a student with a learning disability. And it's really gratifying to be a part of some very serious change that has happened at Bard in this area. I am really enjoying that part of it as well.

03:48 Josh: That's great, Erika! I'm glad you mentioned the change. If you wouldn't mind kind of talking about how things have progressed from the time you were here to now and what some of those changes were.

04:04 Erika: Sure! For one thing, the accommodations in the classroom, they are much more normal. Faculty are much more comfortable. There are accommodations that are just standard for faculty now. Faculty have had training in how to implement certain accommodations. Faculty have training in how to interact with students with disabilities in a way, I'm very pleased to say, that has become more sensitive to the needs of students, than when I was a student. People have a growing understanding of accessibility and just disability as part of the diversity. When faculty or students are talking about accessibility, it's done much more inclusively and with much more sensitivity to the needs of the people who are actually being discussed. So that's something I'm really proud of. There are also just some pragmatic changes that have happened in terms of the campus being more accessible. I mean, it's tough, Bard is a little schoolhouse on the hill, emphasis on the hill, our seasons are snow and mud. The reality is that the landscape is tough for folks with mobility issues or other physical disabilities. But I think the college is really pushing in the right direction in terms of making this terrain easier to navigate for folks with physical disabilities. So, we have on the Bard website an accessibility map that is interactive so folks can actually plot out which routes or paths are the most accessible to them. There is much more signage, there's also little things like automatic doors. I think that the physical campus has seen a lot of improvement.

06:03 Josh: That's great, Erika! And really along those lines are our next question kind of ties into that quite nicely: what are some examples of services and resources that you provide to students? And how do you really assist with those physical and learning disabilities?

06:22 Erika: Right! I think in terms of learning disabilities and also for folks who don't have a documented disability, I am trying to make my office a resource for folks who may not have had access to evaluation because we know that getting tested done and even having a certain diagnosis presents obstacles to equity. Not everyone has the same access, not everyone has the same resources. So, it's important to me that these services are not being only restricted to people with documentations. And I worked really closely with the Learning Commons as well. But in terms of the learning strategies, one of the things that we are working on is putting together very individualized tailored coaching for students who might be struggling with the workload or the executive functioning, which is what we called being able to put everything together in terms of the time it takes, the planning, remembering things when you need to remember them, etc. whether it's how to write a 10-page paper without exhausting you... So, between myself and the Learning Commons, we do a lot of coaching around this, help students adapt, and help them build strategies that work for them. I'm very adamant that there are no wrong ways to learn, there are only bad fits. So, there are resources that can be very helpful for students, things like audio books, accessible texts using technologies to help read or retain information or to help take notes, things like that. I know there's stigma around it. Students don't want to take the easy way, or they don't want to be cheating. So, I am very adamant about learning strategies that are tailored to how you learn, learning strategies that help you budget your energy so you can get through everything you need to get through, and de-stigmatizing, the tools and resources that we have, can make it easier. We want learning to be about the joys and the inspirations that it brings, not just discipline, and sitting for hours in the library. So, in terms of the services we provide, there's a lot of coaching that happens around that, and also access to get accommodations and coordinating with professors about how to make the classroom experience more accessible and connecting with other resources on campus, whether it's counseling and Learning Commons, or advising. Does that answer your question? Sort of?

09:19 Josh: Absolutely!

09:24 Mackie: I have a question, Erika, which is sort of when we talked in the past and thinking about services at Bard, you've mentioned something that I really valued and ensured that there's an attitude that it's important the

work is done by these people in the positions and not always placed on the students who are facing accessibility issues. Can you talk a little bit about that?

09:55 Erika: Absolutely! I think that there's a lot of emotional labor, a lot of invisible labor that goes along with the disability. You know, the burden is on the individual to find ways of getting what they need. I think people often don't understand how exhausting that can be, and that just getting to the same class that everyone else is in, getting the information that everyone else has can be exhausting, and actually already puts a student at a disadvantage before the work really even happens. So, I am really adamant that the school, through myself and other services, takes on some of the responsibility for that. One small change that we've made this year is just that the level of responsibility that I take, even with the accommodation letters, I think there has been... not just at Bard, but this is really an American thing. The sense that one needs to advocate for themselves: if you want something, make it happen. But by the time you've been doing that, you are exhausted sometimes. So, one of the things that we have changed this year is that when professors have questions about an accommodation, when they think something might be inappropriate or they don't understand the context, just putting myself between students and faculty as a liaison, if the student wants that, frees the students up to not have to do the emotional labor and also helps maintain boundaries and privacy so that students don't feel obligated to share their personal things about them that other students wouldn't be expected to share, so that is part of it.

11:42 Mackie: Thanks, I think that's a really helpful point! Thanks for laying that out and providing that liaison role. I think that's crucial.

11:55 Erika: We do have tons of students who are very comfortable advocating for themselves. And I do want to mention that I'm not trying to infantilize anybody, we have many students who, after the letter I sent, they handle it all on their own and only let me know when they need it. Again, I just want to emphasize that it's individualized, it's tailored to how much you need. It's just important for students to know how much is available so they get to choose how much they share; they get to choose where their boundaries are. That's really important to me.

12:30 Mackie: We touched just briefly on the limitations, or at least the reality of campus, the physical space of the campus. Are there any other things that you can think of that students should be aware of, about the sort of the realities of Bard?

12:47 Erika: Yes, yeah, in terms of the physical campus, I think this is picking up steam as well, but there are more students realizing that having a mobility device, like a scooter, if that's helpful for them, can really make a difference not just because of the energy that's required to get around the campus, but because it's the northeast, so we get ice and snow. Anybody with mobility issues... we have pretty good transportation on campus. But to be able to have the independence to not have to be dependent on it all the all the time, I think really makes a difference for people.

13:32 Josh: Absolutely! Erika, I'm just wondering how can a student be in touch with you regarding their specific needs and creating the resources and pathways they would need to be successful at Bard?

13:45 Erika: I am definitely available by email. disabilityservices@bard.edu or my name Erika van der Velden. But on the website, email is the best way. I'm happy to talk with people who are prospective students as well. I know sometimes figuring out the accessibility of a school is a pretty key variable in figuring out where you are going to go. So, when students set up an accommodation with me, it always starts with a really quick registration and then a meeting that we have one-on-one to discuss what the student's needs are, what their style is, and then the details of what kind of accommodations they need if they need them. I'm pretty focused on doing this individually but people also get referred to me by their deans or by their faculty. So, there's a lot of ways to get here.

14:44 Mackie: Thanks, Erika! I think that's all the questions that Josh and I had for you today. But it's been a real pleasure! Thank you so much for joining us! And if anyone has any questions also about this or if you want to reach out to admission to find additional direction, you can reach out to admission@bard.edu as well!

15:10 Josh: Yeah, on that note, we look forward to next time and being in touch with you all! Take care!