

Amy-Bird-Autism-Acceptance-Interview

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SPEAKERS

Paul Huddleston, Amy Bird

Paul Huddleston 00:00

Today we're speaking with Amy Byrd from the access Office and your district access now, right

Amy Bird 00:06

I am I'm district director as of last March, March of 22.

Paul Huddleston 00:13

I've known you for years you've been involved with the Florissant Valley Access Office. And you did go to other campuses during that time, correct?

Amy Bird 00:22

Yes, as the managers, we all would meet together. I actually started at St. Louis Community College at Meramec and I was there for nine years came up to Flo Valley and was here for 11 years before I became the District Wide Director. So my entire professional career has been working with individuals with disabilities, and I've been with St. Louis Community College for 22 years.

Paul Huddleston 00:43

That's a long time, a very long time. You've gotten good

00:47

at this haven't showered, I would like to think so.

Paul Huddleston 00:49

The Access Office, we've got them on every campus. Yes. And their purpose is to provide assistance to students who have learning disabilities, physical disabilities, basically, if they need help accessing their education,

Amy Bird 01:07

absolutely right, we want to give them equal opportunity to get the supports in place that they need in order to hopefully be as successful as possible in all of their classes. Typically, that means that we're providing accommodations within the classroom and or for their materials for the classes, like alternate format, books, any other kind of technology they might need, working with their professors as they might need. But importantly, I think, for me coming in as a director, one of the things I really want people to feel is that they have a home in the access Office that they can be connected to other people. And we actually here at Flo have outside of our office space, it says you'll belong here. If you have an IEP or a 504 plan

Paul Huddleston 01:52

for someone to get services from the access Office, is that an absolute requirement?

Amy Bird 01:59

It is not a requirement. Really, what we want you to do is come in and talk to us because sometimes students don't know if they have a diagnosis, we can refer out for diagnostics, we can talk to individuals about whether they've ever had any sort of doctors information that says that, yes, they needed some sort of assistance at some point in their lives. Maybe they have a historical record of a disability, we just want to talk to you and figure out whether there's something that that we can do to provide those supports.

Paul Huddleston 02:26

The purpose of us talking right now is for Autism acceptance month, which I have messed up every other time I've talked to somebody on this. I am accustomed to Autism Awareness Month, we here at STLCC are trying to go a little bit beyond just awareness. Correct?

Amy Bird 02:44

Correct. So last year was the first time that we did autism acceptance month. And we were actually following the lead of some of our community partners, the Starkloft Disability Institute, their Access U. program, was instrumental in helping us realize that we should be calling it autism acceptance month. And I think that that is, the idea behind that is that it's not so much that we need to learn awareness, but actually to accept people as they are on the spectrum and really change the focus from a deficit model to an acceptance model.

Paul Huddleston 03:19

I completely agree with that. I think it's beneficial for our students on the whole to not just be aware of their neurodivergent peers, but to be accepting of them. Because that's, that's something else I did want to talk about. Do you use the language neurodivergent, or neurotypical? Or do you prefer to use the like autism spectrum on the spectrum etc.

Amy Bird 03:47

We have historically been using autism spectrum. And actually, even those terms have changed. Initially, we had people that were diagnosed as Asperger syndrome, and then we had people that were autistic. And then the diagnosticians decided that it was more of a spectrum disorder. So that's when

we're talking about autism spectrum disorders. And now most recently, I think a lot of people are talking about being neurodivergent, which does not just mean people who are on the spectrum, but can also mean people who have attention deficit disorder. It's very common for people on the spectrum to also have ADHD and some other diagnoses as well, that kind of all go together. So it's a better overall umbrella for people that that fit into some of these categories.

Paul Huddleston 04:34

When we're talking about what the Access office can provide, specifically with regards to those who are on the autism spectrum, or who do have diagnosed or even undiagnosed Autism Spectrum Disorder, what can the access Office do for those students to help them succeed in a college environment?

Amy Bird 04:59

So one of the things that I think is really important to get out to people is that sometimes people who are on the spectrum, don't think that they need any sort of supports from the access Office, because maybe they're taking all art classes, for example, this is very common. Well, you're not going to need extended time testing, you're not going to need note taking. If you're in an art class, what you might need is something that happens outside of the classroom, like just some additional supports on are you keeping track of your assignments, are you staying on top of your projects, and then additional things I like to tell students, you can get this instructor notification form from us. And you don't have to use any of the accommodations that are listed on here. But this is also a key for your professor to know that you're connected with somebody. So sometimes individuals who are on the spectrum don't realize when they're falling behind, they don't realize if they're, they're not keeping up, they don't necessarily know that there's an issue until it's too late. But if a professor knows that, that individuals connected with our office, then we can get together and make sure that we're helping those students stay on top stay on task and stay on track with what they're doing.

Paul Huddleston 06:09

Know Is that something that if the professor or instructor sees that maybe that student is having a little bit of a struggle that they can reach out to whoever is handling that student through the access Office or the access Office on that campus and say, Hey, can I sit down with you and this student and discuss some things that I'm seeing in the classroom that maybe we could try and work on to make sure that the student has a better time? Absolutely. That is what we want our professors to be able to do. Because what we are engaging in is what we call the interactive process, which means it is not the access Office and the student. It also involves the professor because the professor is the one that's in charge of the classroom, the professor gets to have a say in how things are done. And sometimes I think there's a mistake that they just have to do what we say. But it's really a process of all of us working together to figure out what is going to be the best thing for the student. Additionally, sometimes professors may get the wrong impression of students who are on the spectrum. And I think it's helpful for them to go ahead and reach out and talk to us about things the students who have registered with our office, they do give us permission to communicate with all of their professors. So if you're getting an instructor note, you absolutely have permission to talk to us. We don't disclose the nature of the disability, which is a standard sort of thing that we say, however, I strongly encourage students who are on the spectrum to go ahead and disclose to their professors that this is what's going on. Because sometimes people do not understand not everyone has accepted autism yet. And they don't necessarily

know what they're looking at. So a student might have trouble getting along with others in class, maybe they don't like to do group work. And we really want to give it the proper look, in terms of hey, yes, this is an autism spectrum disorder that that you're looking at here. A lot of people seem to maybe have difficulties. I don't wanna say identifying but understanding. When somebody says, I'm on the autism spectrum, I have Autism Spectrum Disorder, or I'm neurodivergent. There's so much that that can entail from simply just way, way back the dinosaur ages when I was young, that was the kid who was kind of shy and refused to make eye contact. Right, that probably would have been diagnosed as being on the spectrum. But it can also be somebody who is just very egregiously outgoing, and just really pushing. That could also be it because there's that concept of not understanding boundaries. Right,

Amy Bird 08:51

exactly. And that's why it's called a spectrum. And, you know, way back in the Dark Ages, when I was in school, I didn't even have kids that had autism in any of my classes, right? Because they weren't necessarily Yes, I'm that old that they weren't necessarily in public education. So a lot has changed over the years. We're seeing a lot more. I think another thing to consider is the recent diagnosis of people on the spectrum, it's important to note, particularly for our campuses at Forest Park and Flo Valley, that individuals who are African American are statistically way behind being diagnosed. And that can become more problematic in terms of some of the early interventions that people can have. So these two campuses are just sort of catching up with what's happened at our West County campuses at Wildwood and at Meramec, they've been seeing a trend for quite a while that the other two campuses are just now catching up to so it can be new for people to experience those things and they're not exactly sure what they're looking at.

Paul Huddleston 09:56

One thing that I've noticed in speaking with a number of individuals who eat There are on the spectrum or, in one case has a child who's on the spectrum, boys seem to be diagnosed a lot younger than girls. Yes. And that's that that's due to a difference in the way it presents exact generally a gig and generalization because it is a spectrum exams, everything,

Amy Bird 10:19

it manifests itself differently in girls. And that's, that's common for a number of diagnoses as well, ADHD, too, it's the the girls that might be inattentive, where the boys are very hyperactive. So they call a lot more attention to themselves, and they tend to get diagnosed earlier. So you know, whether it's a matter of just we're not looking at girls in the same way. And I think probably historically, we weren't thinking that girls had autism, as much as we're realizing now that they do.

Paul Huddleston 10:53

And I've also heard a lot of people talk in the media and whatnot, about this epidemic of autism. And I don't necessarily think there's an epidemic of autism, as in there's just all these overwhelming new cases. But I think it's more along the lines of we are aware of it and looking for it. Yes, I agree.

Amy Bird 11:13

Because when you do start to think about it, and you start to look at it, well, you realize, oh, wait, I know some 50 year olds that seemed like they would be on the spectrum, right. So it doesn't mean that it's a

brand new thing, it just means it was never diagnosed before and people managed to cope or figure it out, or again, we didn't know them, because they were placed in special schools, and we didn't have the opportunity to be around people.

Paul Huddleston 11:38

That was the way it was exactly. And I don't recall ever hearing about autism, probably until I was in my 30s. And that was just

Amy Bird 11:47

last week, right?

Paul Huddleston 11:49

You're very, very nice, Amy, you know that. But this is something that is not necessarily a new thing. It's just something that we're finding out more about, right. And there is ongoing research into possible causes, newer ways to help people overcome some of the difficulties right, or work around some of the difficulties that they may have. Right?

Amy Bird 12:19

Right. And you've probably heard that there are big autism proponents that are very upset with Autism Speaks Yes. And the idea of fixing people who are on the spectrum, we've witnessed a lot of our students last year at autism acceptance month, that were very upset, it's it's a very harmful sort of thing for people to feel like somebody's out there to to fix them, instead of accept them. Yes. So that that's where we are, but definitely interventions that will assist people with being able to talk. And if there are physical limitations, when kids are younger, it's very helpful to get them some of those supports with language, with their speech with their motor skills, or fine motor skills. These things are incredibly helpful when they're young. But it doesn't mean that we want to take away the the autism of who they are, and the way that they see the world, which to me is such a fascinating, I just love to try to think about what goes on here. It's fascinating to me how they have such a different worldview. And I love listening to their experiences, in speaking

Paul Huddleston 13:36

with the people that I've had the opportunity to speak to the last week or so. That is the one thing I think that stands out is it's not so much a difference in function as it is a difference in perceptions in the way they see and feel things. Yes. And I don't think that's really pointed out all that much.

Amy Bird 14:01

Right? Right. They can take in so they're they're experiencing the world in such a completely different way. And I think where we're at right now is we spend a lot of time trying to the world has spent a lot of time trying to get them to think the way that we do instead of us trying to understand what is it that you're thinking about right now that I can glean some some insight from what it is that that you're understanding and what it is that you're doing? Clearly, there are so many people who are on the spectrum who have amazingly brilliant ideas and are out there changing the world. And if we try to take away the ideas that they have in their heads, we are really missing out on some incredible opportunities.

Paul Huddleston 14:46

Absolutely. That was that. Like I said, that's the biggest thing is hearing how, for instance, one young lady was saying that, you know, she hears every sound, every sound and I do too. Do I'm sure you do, we just can ignore the ones that are always there. Right? So I use the example I don't hear the lights buzzing, right. I don't hear the the woosh of the air through the AC. And she looked at me and said, Oh, I do. Right. And but that's something that we've conditioned ourselves to be able to ignore

Amy Bird 15:21

it somewhat. But also, I think that their sensation is actually tuned up very, very much higher than the average person. So it is something when you see people reacting a certain way, it could be that there's a particular smell in the classroom, or, you know, somebody's wearing a certain kind of perfume, or, you know, there's a lot of crossover with the different senses with people as well, that, again, it's just a very fascinating thing. We don't spend a lot of time thinking about how it is other people think, yes.

Paul Huddleston 15:51

And I think that's one of the big things when you're talking about someone who is on the autism spectrum is they think and perceive, I guess, they think because they perceive in different ways, they think in different ways as well. Right,

Amy Bird 16:06

exactly. So we have to try to really figure out what you know, how can we kind of harness some of that sort of energy that they have, and make the environment as palatable as possible for people that are, you know, make sure that they they have a place where they can sit and focus and make sure that they can pay attention to what's happening in the classroom and sort of balance out all of those things, if somebody needs to get up and go for a walk, okay, if somebody needs to put headphones on at certain times, because they have to tune some things out. Obviously, they have to still listen to the lecture, but are there some times where students just needs a break because they're being overstimulated by everything that's happening. And we're seeing a lot more of that, I think, in society, where there are some opportunities for people to have different sorts of experiences in different places, I think the aquarium in St. Louis has developed. And I think the zoo does some stuff like this to where you don't have to be in a room where everybody's super loud, you can be somewhere else where it's a little bit quieter, you can have some headphones, you can do some, some things differently. And this is not we've done this for a long time we have Braille, right we have, we have a lot of other things for other disabilities. So this, to me is just sort of the next step. We want to make sure that we're being accessible to everyone. And autism is just kind of the the next step and all of this that we've been doing.

Paul Huddleston 17:35

So is there anything else you wanted to bring up,

Amy Bird 17:38

I would just, you know, I have so many stories about meeting people on the spectrum, and just really stressing how important it is for people to, if nothing else, show up at an access Office. So you can

meet some other people who might have had similar experiences to you. Because it's not an experience I've had. So I can only connect people so much. And I have always really felt it's so important to connect people that have similar situations to each other, to show, here's an experience that this person has had, you can learn from each other way more than you can learn something from me. So if we can be a conduit to that I think that is so important. And I think we need to be doing that is to be bringing people in and bringing people together so that they can work together. Right now our office at Flo has three students who are on the spectrum than our work study students. And I just love it. They all have such a different, a different and unique ability and talent that they bring to our office. But yet they have a lot of things that aren't common. I love it. If you have autism come see us. It's my favorite thing. Like an advertisement

Paul Huddleston 18:52

completely for that. If someone wanted to get a hold of the access Office, the easiest way other than stopping by would probably be via email, you can email it just access at STL CC or is delineated by campus.

Amy Bird 19:07

We have district wide that they can do so DWaccess@stlcc.edu. And then each campus also has an email. So every access @STLCC.edu FPaccess, WW access and CC access.

Paul Huddleston 19:24

Yeah, remember? Yeah, I'm on forest Valley. I remember Merrimack one. Yeah, so

Amy Bird 19:29

and then we also have a web presence that we're working on updating but you can find us on the web just by going to the SLCC website and plugging in disability or access either run in the search engine and you'll be able to find us. But we also love it when people just stop in and say hey, have a professor bring somebody over. A lot of our students bring their friends, which I love. Like I think you could use some some access too.

Paul Huddleston 19:58

Isn't that kind of like The the, I guess the student version of the word of mouth, hey, yes, this place helped me. Yes, you could probably use this and who knows somebody better than their friends. Right. Exactly.

Amy Bird 20:09

I am all for that. Yes. Get it's a grassroots effort.

Paul Huddleston 20:14

I think it's fantastic. Amy, thank you so much. Thank you for a wonderful talking to you. And hopefully people will hear this and think a little bit differently about Autism Autism Spectrum and those who may be a little bit different in their perceptions on the world. And maybe if they think they might be a little bit different on their perceptions will swing by the access Office. That

Amy Bird 20:39

would be great. Thank you.

Paul Huddleston 20:41

Thanks again, Amy.