SAS Annual Report 2020-21

Student Accessibility Services

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INTRODUCTION

Mission Statement
The mission of Student Accessibility Services (SAS) is to promote equal educational access and full participation by and for students with disabilities in the rich academic and campus life environment at UC Merced.

SAS Pillars
- *Equality of Opportunity* - Promote more welcoming and inclusively designed environments.
- *Collaborative Education* - Ensure equal and meaningful access to campus programs in collaboration with students, staff, faculty, and community members.
- *Advocacy and Awareness* - Commitment to recognize disability as a valued aspect of diversity and equity

Purpose of Report
Student Accessibility Services has undergone some major changes in the past few years and with the transition back to on-campus services it has been a good time to review our practices, policies, and initiatives. Throughout the past year we conducted both a SAS Student Survey as well as a Faculty Listening Tour. Using the data gathered we then decided to put together a broad overview of Student Accessibility Services that analyzes our past services and lays out a plan of action. Our hope is that this document will be a broad picture of our current services and will help introduce who we are and what we do to the wider campus community.

SAS Staff Directory
Assistant Dean of Students and Interim Dean of Students (Supervisor) – Armando Contreras
Coordinator, Student Accessibility Services – Drew Shelburne
Student Access Consultants – 6-8 student employees
Student Exam Proctors – Pool of 15-20 student employees

YEAR IN REVIEW

Data and Statistics

(All numbers are current data as of May 15, 2021, unless otherwise noted)

Students Currently Registered with SAS – 219

- o Freshmen – 30
- o Sophomore – 29
- o Junior – 46
- o Senior – 91
- o Graduate – 19

SAS Students by School

- o School of Natural Sciences – 41
- o School of Engineering – 43
- o School of Social Studies, Humanities and the Arts (SSHA) – 110

New Students Registered in Past Academic Year

- o 45 new SAS students

Accommodation Letters Issued

- o 1225

Exams Proctored by SAS

- o Spring 2021 – 178
- o Fall 2020 – 194
- o Spring 2020 – 322
- o Fall 2019 – 648

Graduation Statistics

- o Spring 2021 - 44
- o Fall 2020 – 20
- o Spring 2020 – 62
- o Fall 2019 – 27
- o Spring 2019 - 38

Accommodation Letters
These are letters sent by SAS to each faculty member for a student's courses to notify them of their approved accommodations – students are expected to make a request for the letters each semester to put them in control of distributing that information

Exam Proctoring
One of the biggest changes during the past year was the shift away from needing SAS help and provide exam accommodations – With online instruction, faculty have been able to add additional time during online exams; which ultimately made it easier for students. SAS is looking into how we can integrate this into our regular services to provide students with better assistance.

YEAR IN REVIEW

COVID-19 Response

This past academic year has involved a great deal of strategic thinking and coordination in order to provide our services while working remotely due to COVID-19. Beginning in March 2020 when the campus had to abruptly shift, SAS has been reevaluating our processes and procedures to meet the new demands.

One of the first issues that arose involved test taking accommodations and how they would work in an online setting. Our normal process was focused on setting up a physical testing space for the students and proctoring them with our staff. This would obviously not work in an online setting, so we had to adjust for the new programs and setup that were being used.

Fortunately, we were quickly able to find a way to notify faculty of accommodations leading up the exam, which allowed them to go in and provide most accommodations themselves. The most common of these were extended time accommodations, however we were also able to work out other situations like those involving reduced distraction environments and accessibility of the exam software itself.

YEAR IN REVIEW

Major Initiatives

Student Survey –

In the Fall semester of 2020, SAS created and distributed a survey to all students currently registered with our office. There were several goals to this project, but the most important were to get an idea of how the transition to remote services had affected students and their academics as well as a broader inquiry about SAS and our services and how well they were meeting student's needs. The survey was live during the end of November 2020 into early December near the end of the Fall 2020 semester. We received 26 responses (from a pool of about 250) which was low but still gave us some interesting data. Below are some of the key data that were produced from this survey:

Field	Agree		Somewhat Agree		Somewhat Disagree		Disagree		Total
The transition to distance learning was communicated clearly	73.91%	17	13.04%	3	4.35%	1	8.70%	2	23
I feel comfortable reaching out to SAS for assistance	69.57%	16	17.39%	4	8.70%	2	4.35%	1	23
SAS staff respond quickly to questions or concerns	69.57%	16	26.09%	6	0.00%	0	4.35%	1	23
The change in accommodation delivery has not had a negative impact on my academic progress	60.87%	14	8.70%	2	8.70%	2	21.74%	5	23

Showing rows 1 - 4 of 4

One of the main factors behind sending out the survey during this year was to gauge how the transition to remote learning had affected SAS students. Additionally, we wanted to see how our offices response and follow up had done to mitigate the circumstances students were facing. In the Table 1 above, a clear pattern showed that over 60% of our students felt that things had been handled well and that the change had not adversely affected them. Of the other respondents, things were a bit more mixed, although most of the additional responses fell in the "somewhat agree" category. Overall, the response seems adequate, but there were obviously things that were missed and ways in which SAS could have handled the situation better.

#	Field	Agree		Somewhat Agree		Somewhat Disagree		Disagree		Total
1	Setup for testing accommodations is clear and easy to follow	61.54%	16	26.92%	7	11.54%	3	0.00%	0	26
2	Delivery of exam accommodations happens quickly and efficiently	48.00%	12	36.00%	9	16.00%	4	0.00%	0	25
3	The move to distance learning did not have a negative impact on this accommodation	68.00%	17	4.00%	1	16.00%	4	12.00%	3	25

Showing rows 1 - 3 of 3

Exams were another issue that we hoped to find some important feedback. Typically, SAS proctors exams in our own testing rooms – these spaces provide not only an uninterrupted opportunity to take their exam in a reduced distraction environment, it also allows our students to take their exams with extended time (when approved) without having to worry about any interruptions and location changes. The results in Table 2 that stand out show that while a majority of students did not think the

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change had a negative impact on them, it also showed a much higher percentage of scores in the disagree category – slightly above 25%. This would suggest that while we still met the majority of our student's needs, those that fell behind were much more negatively impacted.

Learning Lessons
o Communication and clarity is key – SAS needs to improve their transparency in processes and provide clear communication of expectations
o Exams accommodations can be handled online with minimal modifications – SAS should grow collaborations with faculty to promote ways in which accommodations can be delivered with the least impact on the student

Faculty Listening Tour –

As a follow up to our student survey, we decided in Spring of 2021 to also gather feedback from our faculty partners on campus. Rather than adding another survey to the glut that had been going out over the past year, we instead chose to conduct a listening tour during April. We put on four different sessions where faculty were invited to join and share about their experience working with SAS.

One of the main themes that emerged was confusion regarding policies and procedures and what the expectations are for those faculty. There was a general feeling that SAS is efficient at addressing crises and difficult situations, but concern that much of this was reactive rather than preventative. One professor in particular mentioned that there was an issue during the semester with a student note taker set up with our office, however they were unaware of the situation until the student brought the problem to them. Ultimately that situation was resolved, but the lack of communication with the faculty member left them confused on how to respond to a student's concerns and without the tools to follow up.

In reviewing the initiative SAS concluded that it was a worthwhile attempt to gather information, but more traditional methods such as a survey might have gathered more useable data. In the future it would be worthwhile to include this type of feedback session as a part of a much bigger outreach rather than relying on real-time participation especially while dealing with the high stress and confusion from the 2020 COVID situation.

Learning Lessons
o Communication with faculty is lacking – SAS needs to improve our ongoing faculty relationships, increase knowledge of SAS processes, and revise our current emails and templates to better describe the steps that need to be taken
o Low Faculty Awareness – SAS has the potential to be strong partners with faculty and gain their advice and support in working with our students. Some form of a handbook or overview of services would help new and continuing faculty learn and then improve our current setup.

CART (Communication Access Real-time Translation) Initiative –

Moving to online learning was a much bigger obstacle for some of our students than the others from an accommodation viewpoint. One that we had not expected was a sudden need for CART services (Communication Access Real-time Translation), a method by which students who are heard of hearing or deaf can have access to real-time captioning for their classes. The setup of online courses

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via Zoom had the unfortunate effect of compounding some of the most common issues for these students – inconsistent audio, drops in quality, and the fact that a majority of participants tend to not have their cameras on.

We saw an immediate jump in usage of this service – from zero students the previous year to 5 needing it to be able to attend their classes. SAS has used a service for several years that was able to meet the need, but the associated costs also rose dramatically. This was a year that saw a huge increase in need for this type of service, across all college campuses. With the high price tag, we saw a need to review our current vendor and see if there were any alternatives available that operated at a better cost while still meeting our student's needs.

After polling several other campuses, we got in touch with Verbit.ai, a company that provides real-time transcription services that mix AI based interpretation along with a live person double checking and editing the results for accuracy. Over the course of the 2020/21 year, we were able to vet their program and ultimately request a contract with them to provide services. During the Summer 2021 semester we will have a student piloting the program to compare it to our previous vendor. By the end of the summer SAS will have a better idea of how well the vendor is serving our students and plan ahead for the coming years needs based off that information.

Accessibility Resource Group

The 2020-21 year also saw the reconvening of the Accessibility Resource Group for UC Merced. Headed by Cindi Zimmerman and De Acker the goal of the group is to coordinate the accessibility of the campus and the delivery of accommodations outside the purview of Student Accessibility Services and the Accommodations office in Human Resources. Several campus representatives are included in the roster, including Drew for SAS. While initial movement has met some of the same obstacles that were present in previous iterations of the group, progress is starting to be made in taking stock of current campus accommodations and how they are delivered.

There were several specific actions taken through the past year showing this progress of the group. For the first time in nearly a decade a revised Animal Policy was written and submitted for review by this group and will be followed up by sharing it with the entire campus. The updated policy addresses many new situations that have come up in recent years, including the increase in requests for Emotional Support Animals to accompany students in Housing, as well as policies regarding animals in general being on campus.

Another point of progress was the reevaluation of the Cart program created by Transportation and Parking Services. This program was initially created to assist campus constituents with short term mobility needs in getting to various locations on campus. In the few years it has been in place, there have been several instances where the demand has exceeded capacity leading to unfortunate complications and frustration for everyone involved. Through the evaluation the group has arrived at several ways that the service can be updated or modified to both meet campus needs while also having the support needed to run it efficiently.

PLANNING FOR 2021/22 ACADEMIC YEAR

Summer/Fall Planning

Now that we have finished the 2020/21 academic year, we've increased our preparations for the transition back to on-campus instruction. Based on the experience with the abrupt shift in services in March 2020, we are planning several initiatives that will aid our office in the transition. The goal being to have communication with faculty, staff, and students that clearly lays out the policies and procedures for the new year along with addressing some of the more common problems that we anticipate based on experience as well as data from our surveys. During the course of the summer we will continue to provide remote services to students in summer session, taking advantage of the lower participation to implement the following programs as we move toward the Fall semester start date.

Initiatives

SAS Handbook – available for incoming students and families

The data presented above provided valuable information on where SAS has been most effective for students, along with a sense of where we can best redirect and improve our services. One of the key comments from the student survey was a lack of direction in how accommodation processes were set up, and long delays in follow up when obstacles arose. After reviewing with the student staff as well as Armando, we are moving forward with a plan to create a comprehensive SAS handbook.

The purpose of this handbook would be to serve as a general overview of all SAS services and ensure that accommodation processes are clear, succinct, and lead to results. One of the key parts of this handbook will include a walkthrough on the intake process – filling out the public request, submitting supporting documentation, and follow up meetings with SAS staff. Additionally, this handbook will include a short but thorough FAQs list that can be referenced for general questions and concerns that often have standard responses but to this point have always required additional staff time in order to do communicate those answers.

By having this information publicly available and posted prominently on our website we hope to avoid situations where students must reach out directly to the SAS office in order to receive guidance and then have to wait as our small office works through our inbox.

Planned Completion Date – End of Fall Semester 2021, implement in Spring 2022

Access Consultant Training Program

Student Access Consultants are a vital part of the SAS team – Drew as the sole FTE often has days or weeks where meetings with students and resolving higher level issues that arise can take up a large chunk of available time. In order to make sure that all services are delivered in a timely manner we rely on the Access Consultants to handle many of the administrative functions of the office at a much more involved capacity than most offices would give to students. However, the fact of the situation is that student employees are students first, and for many of them they will only be working with SAS for 1-2 years. Since the office has so many moving parts and processes to keep in mind, training has

always been a difficult task. Again, the student survey showed many of the students with negative experiences with the office note communication and delays as the main complaint.

To adjust for this SAS is currently creating an Access Consultant Training Program – the ultimate goal is to have a folder containing all the materials needed to train a new student employee as well as a checklist to make sure that they cover everything. This document will have specific guidelines on the training process, including both a one-week boot camp style orientation before the new semester as well as plans for regular follow up and check in during the regular semester.

This guide will also help provide more long-term stability to SAS. Much of the institutional knowledge of our office is apparent only to those who have been around for some time – most especially in the case with Drew. If something were to happen to either group, it would have dramatic effects on our ability to continue providing services. With a training handbook in place, we can make sure that even in unforeseen circumstances there are files and training waiting that can help bridge the gap.

Planned Completion Date – August 2021 with implementation in Fall 2021

SAS Faculty Guide

Continuing the theme of improved communication and awareness of SAS policies, we next plan on putting together an SAS Faculty Guide – a collection of resources and materials that can assist our faculty and staff partners across the campus in providing the best support and access for students with disabilities. This document will include broad information similar to the student and staff guides such as descriptions of policies and procedures, a list of FAQs, as well as examples of different situations that may come up and the best ways of addressing them.

Through these different initiatives we hope to be able to provide clearer communication of accommodation expectations and ultimately provide the best opportunity for students with disabilities to learn and grow and then show their knowledge of the material.

Planned Completion Date – End of Fall Semester 2021, implement in Spring 2022

STUDENT FEEDBACK

Below are a selection of responses from both the Student Survey that provide some context to the information shared in this report –

"I am basing most of my answers on past experiences, not this semester as I have not met with SAS this year. However, the incoming emails made me feel reassured throughout the semester that I had help if I so needed it."

- response from Student Survey

"I think that the swap to completely virtual was extremely slow and disregarded by some professors which made things very difficult and confusing. SAS did a great, job but I think the the university struggled as a whole to swapping more so than other schools."

- response from Student Survey

"The professor post their written notes as well as record their lectures on zoom. Honestly, everyone benefits, not just me."

- regarding note taking services during remote instruction

"The main accommodations I had needed before are getting solved by the switch to online learning. All the lecture videos are recorded, tests are 24 hours long. Any accommodation I would've needed through SAS is now offered to everyone in my classes."

- regarding the switch to remote instruction

APPENDIX

Student Accessibility Services
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, MERCED

Faculty Listening Tour

Join the Student Accessibility Services coordinator **Drew Shelburne** and Assistant Dean of Students **Armando Contreras** to participate in our listening tour. It has been designed to gather feedback, as well as highlighting both challenges and successes faculty may experience when partnering with our office.

Feedback from this tour will be used to enhance our communication and support with faculty. Register for one of the sessions below and remember your voice matters!

Zoom Links

Thursday, April 1st, 2021
1pm-2pm:
https://tinyurl.com/listeningtour1

Tuesday, April 13th, 2021
10am-11am:
https://tinyurl.com/listeningtour3

Wednesday, April 7th, 2021
10am- 11am:
https://tinyurl.com/listeningtour2

Monday, April 19th, 2021
1pm-2pm:
https://tinyurl.com/listeningtour4

For questions please contact us at:
(209) 228-6996 | access@ucmerced.edu

If you are unable to attend any of these dates we will have a feedback form available on our website throughout April -
https://access.ucmerced.edu