# SST Podcast S2 - Episode 6 - Earlee

[Eddie] Welcome to going online with Oregon State University Ecampus. I'm your host Eddie Rodriguez, the Student Engagement Program Manager with Oregon State Ecampus, I'll be giving you the lowdown on resources and tools for online learners across the globe. Ecampus serves more than 13,000 online learners each year through over 100 online degrees and programs.

Let's get into it. All right, welcome to Going Online with Oregon State University Ecampus, I'm your host Eddie Rodriguez. And today I'm bringing you another wonderful guest, someone who I haven't had the privilege yet to meet. But today's episode is really kind of spotlighting our disability access services office as well as kind of examining a little bit of what accessibility means to our students and to our online learners.

So without further ado, I'll pass it over to Earlee. And Earlee, would you mind maybe just starting off by introducing yourself, maybe your background, your professional and personal background that is. And how it has influenced your work and accessibility?

[Earlee] Sure, thanks so much, Eddie. My name is Earlee Kerekes-Mishra and I am the Assistant Director of Disability Access Services, also known as DAS, and I have been here at Oregon State for almost 10 years.

This summer we'll make 10. I've been in higher education for goodness, we're pushing 20, 20 years and I really kind of fell into disability services. It was not something that I had really thought of as a career when I was in college. And when my family got notification that we would be moving to the valley, here in the Willamette Valley, I had found a position that was looking for a coordinator, and it was in disability services.

And while I didn't know a lot about disability services at the time, I had some background in coordinating. So I really had some great mentors in the early stages of my career in disability services. And I felt at home with it, I felt like this was a place where I could make a difference.

And so, I have family members that have children that have disabilities and I also have children that have disabilities. So as my life, my personal and my professional life continued on, it just felt like it was the right place for me to be.

[Eddie] Yeah. No, I really appreciate you sharing a little bit about your own personal sort of connection to also, it sounds like you've already been in the higher education setting and, and, and working in sort of this.

Disability or accessibility services for quite some time. But having probably also that kind of personal connection, your family, your children, like I imagine that obviously probably has really influenced you a lot. So I'm curious to know a little bit more also about your role. You sound like the assistant director, so I'm curious.

Yeah, what does that entail now, what does that work? Now, having had all that kind of experience, what sorts of things are you looking at now?

[Earlee] Yeah, so as the assistant director, I focus a lot of my work on the application process for students. And the documentation requirements that we look for and pairing up students with a DAS advisor so that they have a really great experience.

So that there was someone that's knowledgeable not only about the institution and their programs and resources, but also around their disability. I also have a caseload of students that I work with, and I have a few focus areas that I really enjoy working with students that are on the autism spectrum.

Students that are veteran students and students that are athletes. And so I get to have a little bit of the administrative piece and a little bit of the student contact. And so, it's a really great balance for me.

[Eddie] Yeah, like, do you prefer, I guess, one work over the other, is there one that you feel is more rewarding for you?

[Earlee] I love when something clicks for a student, when they're like, I get it, I've got it. And yes, this is going to work for me and I know my next steps, and so that is extremely rewarding. It's also extremely rewarding for me in the administrative side though, when we streamline a process.

Or we make something more efficient for students and it has a much larger impact than one single student. So I see benefits in both areas and I have really great experiences in both, I like doing all of it.

[Eddie] Yeah, I bet especially that you were kind of mentioning about working with a student who maybe, yeah, maybe having a tough time with the application or other aspects.

And having work with them to get to that point where everything maybe just makes sense is probably, yeah, a really rewarding experience. So yeah, I appreciate you kind of just giving me a little bit more information of the work that you're doing and kind of that sort of intake process and what students are going through. It sounds like that.

Obviously, the application stage is kind of one big part of it. But kind of stepping back and looking more of the high level of the DAs office taking into account our Ecampus students which are online students. What sort of services does data support for our Ecampus students?

[Earlee] Yeah, so disability access services, we support all campuses, Ecampus being one of them.

We look at what some of the impacts students have related to their disability and what the environment, the online learning environment, may have a barrier around disability impacts. And so oftentimes we see a lot of students that maybe they need a little bit more time to complete their exams related to impacts from their disability.

So extended time on exams is a pretty common accommodation in our Ecampus realm. We also have a lot of students that maybe they need to see the written work and words, but they also need to hear the written words. And so we work to ensure that text books or materials that are put into the online classes are able to be read by screen readers or able to be read by a text-to-speech option.

[Eddie] Wow. Okay, so there is a good amount of work then that's kind of going into being able to address student needs. Which I think is great as someone who is just not familiar with a lot of the kinds of needs that students have and the accommodations they might need.

I mean, it's great that obviously DAS is there to kind of help students with that process. In particular for the online students who probably have yeah, it just looks different for them because they're, as you're mentioning in that online space. Another question that was kind of coming up, and sort of transitioning a little bit.

Sometimes students from their past experiences or maybe in that kind of public-school period they might have had. An IEP, an individual education plan, what does that mean for that student when they're entering that college setting?

[Earlee] Yeah, so IEPs and 504 plans, they're very common in the K12 system.

And when you come to the higher education system, whether it's in person or the virtual experience through e-campus, it may look a little bit different. And that may be because the environment is different than the K-12 system. It may be because we have some things that are already built into the programs that you might not have had experience with in the IEP or 504.

And it might be that we just use different terminology and so some of the terminology that we use is academic adjustments or accommodations. And that's where we would get the extended time on exams, maybe the e-text accessible reader for books, maybe captioning on a video, it looks a little bit different.

And so when a student comes to their higher education institution, they sometimes provide us with that IEP. Or they provide us with some other documentation around their disability. And then we like to have a conversation with students and really find out what's going on for them. Sometimes, we have enough information from that IEP in their application to provide some accommodations right away.

And sometimes it's more of a conversation.

[Eddie] Yeah, okay, now, that's helpful to know because, yeah, imagine, yeah, again, some students are maybe entering this higher education with previous support from either that IEP in that K-12 system or maybe if they were in a previous institution. So it sounds like that's kind of a critical piece of like filling out an application and maybe coming with that documentation is really helpful for you all to make those accommodations, those adjustments as you're talking about, which I think is, yeah, probably really, really helpful for the student.

[Earlee] Absolutely.

[Eddie] Now, kind of also, with my next question, thinking about students and some of those, maybe, disabilities that they have been experiencing in the past. What advice would you give students who have struggled with school in the past and feel uncertain about pursuing higher education or learning online?

[Earlee] I would start with saying, you're intelligent, and you've belonged here. And OSU and our e-campus programs along with our on-campus programs, we have a lot of resources for you. And so you belong here, we want you here, and we have things that we either already have built-in or we look at things that we can build in to make sure that access is available.

We want you to be successful, we want to see you succeed. And we have a lot of resources, there's a lot of knowledgeable people, and so it might not just be the disability services office working with you. But also maybe your e-campus success counselor, and maybe there's some coaching that is happening, and maybe some resources from the Academic Success Center.

And so we try to put all of this together to really support the students, and I encourage students to just ask somebody to find their person, right? Find the person that they feel comfortable with. Find someone that they feel like they can ask those questions to. And sometimes that is this access counselor.

Sometimes that is the dentist's office but find someone and started asking questions.

[Eddie] Yeah, absolutely, so it sounds like it's not just one thing like there are a multitude of resources that students can be connecting with. And sometimes, maybe it's also just a matter of finding that one that you resonate with the most.

[Earlee] Absolutely.

[Eddie] Probably to like feel more comfortable.

[Earlee] Absolutely.

[Eddie] To get those needs met. You said something in the beginning about when a student maybe connects with you or your office, being intentional about letting them know that they do belong. They are intelligent, they are smart.

I'm just curious, like why is, why is that like maybe the first thing that comes to mind for you?

[Earlee] I think, historically, we have seen students with disabilities feel less than, be made to feel less than. And you're at Oregon State for a reason. You're here because you're intelligent.

You're here because we believe that disability is not a bad word. Disability is part of our culture, and we can only be the best when we have everyone represented. And people need to know that if you are disabled, you have a place that you're wanted. And oftentimes that's not always an experience that they've had, especially in their educational experience.

[Eddie] Yeah, absolutely and I imagine if they haven't had that experience, it certainly can probably make things more challenging to feel like you're capable of succeeding in x, y, z. So it's great that you talk about that, which really kind of leads me to my next question, which is, there's often a cultural stigma attached to the phrase disability.

I'm curious, how would you suggest fostering a supportive and inclusive, in this case, online learning community for students with disabilities?

[Earlee] I believe it starts with the instructors. And when they're building their courses using universal design ideas and experiences for students. And I also believe that having our disability access services statement on all of their syllabi is important.

When students see something that represents them or hear something that represents them in their course from the beginning, they feel more included. They feel like this is a place, right? Like they're addressing it now from the get-go, and I feel that having an open communication system is an important piece for all students.

[Eddie] Yeah, now, I really like that piece of seeing themselves reflected in a lot of ways and maybe in the curriculum, in new syllabus, as you point out. I think that is a very powerful tool on it. Coming from my own experience, I feel like when I've had myself, those kinds of instances of feeling like this is more around like the cultural identity.

But I feel like it's all connected in some ways that, yeah, you're you just feel a little bit more of that belonging piece that you're kind of mentioning, so that's such a great point. And I'm curious you mentioned the phrase universal design. And from my understanding, that's sort of like a framework or a way to design, maybe, your curriculum or courses in such a way that it accommodates for all students.

But I'm curious, do you have any insights on what exactly universal design means?

[Earlee] Yeah, so to paraphrase and be really short about it, it is making sure that your materials and everything that you put into your course are accessible to the most amount of people possible. Making sure that your videos are captioned.

Making sure that if you are using a PDF that it has alternate, Alternative text tagging, and then making sure that headings are used in all materials, Word documents, PDFs, so that screen readers can read them appropriately. And all of these pieces are pieces of universal design, making sure that if you're purchasing a book for the class to be utilizing or requiring outside technology, that it's accessible.

That if there's something that is related to needing to be heard, that if a deaf student were able to access that or we're needed to access that, that they would still be able to participate and what does that look like? And so Universal Design is bringing all of those pieces in and making sure that all of that's happening all at once.

[Eddie] Yeah, wow that's yeah, no, that's well summarized, I would say. And it definitely makes more sense to me now, yeah, because yeah, being able to do that, I imagine obviously would help all the students to be successful in a particular course. And the fact that we're really kind of advocating that and encouraging our faculty to really think in those terms, can only play dividends for our students.

So that's great, I appreciate you offering some more insight there. My next question, what support is available for online students who may have an undiagnosed disability? Some of the things I've heard and the little that I know is, there are folks out there who, yeah, just might have something that's undiagnosed.

So I'm curious, are there any, yeah, support available for online students or for just students in general?

[Earlee] So some of the things that I recommend to specifically our online students is there's the Anytime Anywhere app for mental health, also known as TELUS, that Oregon State University students have access to, it's free.

And that is a resource for students, to be able to talk to someone anytime they feel they need. And from my understanding, there's the ability to have a consistent relationship with that. I also recommend students just reaching out to our office because we have a network of professionals that are nationwide, that maybe a student lives in Indiana and they're like, I don't know where to go, I don't know where to start.

And maybe we have some colleagues at another institution in Indiana that I can reach out to you and say, hey, where would I even recommend a student to start with looking for this? And they can give us resources of like, here's A, B and C. This is what we recommend to our students and so we can always say, here's what we've heard, here's what we understand.

And we do this sometimes when students contact us, sometimes we have some very specific, like maybe your local community college has options. Maybe your local medical provider, maybe it is something around a local County mental health service. And so there are some things that if a student reaches out to us, we can at least try to reach out and find some options for them.

[Eddie] Yeah, that's great. And one of the things that I'm hearing too is like, it sounds like you also don't have to be someone who has a diagnosed disability to even reach out to your office for that kind of support.

[Earlee] Correct, we may not have a diagnosis to be able to provide an accommodation, but it doesn't mean that we don't have resources that might be available to you.

[Eddie] Yeah, no, that's great. And the fact, too, that you're collaborating with some of your colleagues in different institutions, like, I mean, that's awesome to kind of be able to illustrate students that. Hey, we're all working together and trying to do the most to find those support and that resource and service, so that's great.

The other thing along the lines of kind of what we're talking about in terms of the cultural stigma around the phrase of ability with that, I feel like there's also kind of this lack of awareness and understanding of different disabilities. I'm curious, are there things that can be done to increase awareness and understanding among educators, administrators, and even students in the online learning environment about these sorts of things.

[Earlee] Yeah, so I think that would first start with Disability Services. We have a training module on our website that we encourage people to just look at. It's not the end all, be all, of course, but it just gives a really good understanding of how Disability Services and Access here at Oregon State is viewed and the expectations around it.

I would also say that we have some really great resources on our campus such as the Disabled Student Union. They are able to, you know, share information for maybe e-campus local, maybe a little bit local or local people, I don't localized people. I would also say that we have the Disabled Student Lounge.

And both the Disabled Student Union and the Disabled Student Lounge, they have different presentations that they will do training, maybe not necessarily trainings. I don't know what the wordings I'm looking for, but they do different things and highlight different pieces of the culture of disability. And so different areas, I know that my office has partnered with our Lonnie B Harris Black Cultural Center, to provide a presentation on what's called Triple Cripple experiences.

And that term was coined by two black women identifying disabled people from the UK. And they identified that being triple crippled was being female, being black, and being disabled, and what their experiences were like in higher education. And so when my office partnered with the Lonnie B Harris Black Cultural Center, we brought some students, some staff members, and some teaching faculty to a panel that talked about having those intersecting identities.

And so I think that there's a lot of places that disability shows up, that students and faculty and staff can really learn from, and they're all over the place.

[Eddie] Yeah, no, I appreciate you highlighting some of those specific spaces and some of the work that you're doing.

I know, yeah, the cultural resource centers like the Lonnie B Harris Black Cultural Center do a lot of good work, and there are those sort of educational events and presentations that are happening, and that's awesome that it's kind of everywhere. I imagine, though, probably then it almost becomes a conversation of the onus is on the individual then to kind of the knowledge is out there.

You also have to be willing to probably go out there and do the work yourself, I guess is sort of what I'm thinking about.

[Earlee] We do have some resources on our website, ds.oregonstate.edu and there's some different books, some different articles around disability and disability culture. And I know that we are constantly vetting information to put up there and updating it.

[Eddie] Well, again, that's really good to know. I know for me too, this has been really informative again as someone who full transparency

Tendency like I haven't, I guess maybe been exposed to it or taking that step to actually learn more. So I really appreciate you breaking some of this stuff down, sharing some of these resources because I know it's helpful.

And hopefully, for our audience out there that's listening, they're comfortable to kind of also begin their process of reaching out and learning more. And maybe even addressing any personal challenges that they're potentially experiencing in their online or just learning journey. Coming up with the last sort of formal question I have for you, is there anything else you wish our audience to know about supporting online learners who experience a disability?

[Earlee] I would just reiterate you're intelligent, we want you here, we know that learning may look a little bit different for you, and that's okay, because it looks a little bit different for everybody. And just reach out to us, we're happy to have a conversation, we may not have all the answers, but we are happy to be on the journey with you.

[Eddie] Awesome, thank you so much, Earlee, really appreciate your insights today.

[Earlee] Thanks for having me.