

UA center for learning-disabled rates an 'A'

By Eric Swedlund
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The UA's Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques Center has evolved in 25 years from a program focused on three dyslexic students to a free-standing department serving 560 students with an array of learning disabilities.

The SALT Center is now the largest program of its kind at an American university, with retention and graduation rates better than the university overall.

The nationally renowned center is expanding, adding graduate students to its program for the first time.

Learning as they went along, program coordinators and tutors created a successful model for reaching out to students with learning disabilities and helping them achieve academic success, said director Diane Quinn.

"That little core group of students very quickly became a much larger group of students and the success and popularity of the program began to spread," Quinn said.

In 1980, founding director Eleanor Harner started working one-on-one with the three students and with that individual attention, they were able to succeed. By 1992, the program had grown to more than 300 students and when Quinn took over as director in 1993, the SALT Center became a free-standing department

After nearly two decades in the cramped basement of Old Main, the SALT Center moved into its own home in 2001, a 16,000-square-foot building just north of the Administration Building funded by \$4 million in private donations.

SALT students have a graduation rate of about 80 percent in five years, compared with the universitywide rate of 57 percent over six years. The SALT Center has a first-year retention of 90 percent, compared with the universitywide 77 percent.

"Learning disabilities are a very personal experience," Quinn said.

The center helps students with dyslexia, reading difficulties, auditory processing difficulties and an array of other learning disabilities. The fastest-growing student population at SALT is students with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. In recent years it has also expanded to assist students who don't have a learning disability but who have experienced something that can cause similar challenges, like a seizure disorder or early cancer treatments affecting memory.

"You have to do it student by student," Quinn said. "There is no cookie-cutter way of working with these students. The trick is understanding what a student's specific needs are at any point in time."

David Kemper, a senior from Houston majoring in journalism and business, said he was diagnosed with ADHD in kindergarten and attended a high school for students with learning disabilities.

"We were always encouraged to go to small colleges, but I wanted to break out of that. I wanted a big school to explore myself as a student," he said.

Starting in 2002 as a "nervous little freshman," Kemper met with his learning specialist and started working on his goals. Still, it was slow going. He had a 2.5 GPA his first year, nearly failing a history course.

Kemper worked with a SALT tutor, devising a study plan and trying different study techniques, using notecards and concentrating for specific key words in class. Needing a perfect score to pass the class, Kemper aced the final and hasn't had a semester GPA lower than 3.0 since.

Celebration series lineup

In celebration of its 25th birthday, the SALT Center is hosting a speaker series:

Sept. 22: "For Whom the Bell Curve Tolls: Revealing Portraits of Children Who Fail in School but Succeed in Life," Mark Katz, Learning Development Services, San Diego.

Nov. 10: "An Integrative Medicine Approach to ADD: Is Medication the Only Answer?" Dr. Sandy Newmark, Center for Pediatric Integrative Medicine, Tucson.

Dec. 1: "Transition to Adulthood - Life Skills, Academic and Work Skills," Kathleen Nadeau, Chesapeake Psychological Services, Silver Springs, Md.

Jan. 26: "ADD in the Workplace: What Every Executive and Manager Needs to Know," Carol Gignoux, ADD Insights, Boston.

Feb. 23: "Journeys Through ADDulthood," Sari Solden, psychotherapist, Ann Arbor, Mich.

Presentations are free and open to the public and run from 6 to 7:30 p.m. at the James E. Rogers College of Law, Room 146.

Find more information online at www.salt.arizona.edu/anniversary/series.shtml.

"That semester was the turning point in my college career," he said. "I have this disability, but they said 'Let's work with it and see what we can do,' and that really changed my outlook on college."

Kemper said the SALT Center is a comfortable place where students can relate to each other, all having to put in extra effort to make the grades they want.

"I'm dead sure there's no other place in the world I would have been able to get this kind of help and experience," he said. "The SALT Center is such a special place to this university."

The SALT Center has a staff of 26, including 11 learning specialists who act as academic monitors for the students. Tutors at the SALT Center worked with students more than 19,000 hours in 900 classes

"Students with learning and attention challenges have been entering higher education in much increased numbers over the last 10 years," Quinn said. "We've seen our alumni go on to graduate school in increasingly larger numbers."

SALT Center graduate Brad Farber, 24, earned a political science degree from the UA in December 2003 and is now in his second year at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University in New York.

"From the beginning of my time at the University of Arizona, I was a SALT student and the experience I would say was pretty great," he said. "It's an amazing program there, it really is. They're on top of their stuff there and they really make a difference."

The center has students from 36 states and three foreign countries. More than 80 percent come from outside Arizona.

Parents and students start exploring the SALT Center as early as freshman year in high school.

"What they see first is we're located in a major university environment," Quinn said. "People realize our size and longevity mean something in terms of the program's quality."

Students like the choices and options and want to get a university experience rather than be segmented off on their own or feel stigmatized, she said. The anonymity of a large university is a positive for them.

"You are what you bring to the experience and you don't walk around with labels on your head," Quinn said. "As the students become successful they take pride in being part of the SALT program. Many are earning the best grades they ever have and they're proud of that."

The SALT Center is a fee-based program, charging \$4,200 a year. Scholarships are available for students in need, and in the past year the center gave out \$34,000, with more scholarships to more students than ever.

Amy Back, a 19-year-old sophomore from California, has attention-deficit disorder and has trouble with reading.

"Their support system here for the LD students is amazing," said Beck, an art history major. "They're the top in the country. That was the main driving force of me even looking at the U of A."

Back said she works on her reading assignments with a tutor, talking about the reading so it's easier for her to comprehend.

She also draws pictures or maps of the information, tracking how one concept or key term leads to something else. She also categorizes topics by color, making notecards with related information grouped.

"I've been doing pretty good in classes," she said. "It's definitely helped with my grades because it's helped me understand."

Back said she doesn't look at learning disabilities as a challenge, simply things she has learned to cope with.

"I'm really comfortable with the way they've set me up. They've put me on a path pretty much," she said. "I like keeping a connection, but I'll probably eventually wean myself off of it. I'm not going to need it for every class like my freshman year."

● Contact reporter Eric Swedlund at 573-4115 or at eswedlund@azstarnet.com.

All content copyright © 1999-2005 AzStarNet, Arizona Daily Star and its wire services and suppliers and may not be republished without permission. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the expressed written consent of Arizona Daily Star or AzStarNet is prohibited.