

Reinert helps students with disabilities adjust to college, life

The sign on June Reinert's office door in the Murphy Library Resource Center is simple. "Label Jars Not People." The words — surrounded by an outline of a giant jar — appear unadorned, yet they explain in great detail what Reinert has strived to achieve in higher education for more than 20 years.

Reinert works to help students with disabilities get a fair chance in college. Whether a student has an easily recognizable physical disability or one that's hidden, Reinert and her staff of five help students fight bias or simply give them words of encouragement.

"I feel we save lives every day," says Reinert, coordinator of Disability Resource Services. During the 1996-97 academic year, the office assisted around 400 students — up from the 90 helped annually when Reinert began her position in the office in 1986. Reinert also has helped increase the number of service hours to students with disabilities from 600 to 20,000 annually.

About two-thirds of the students using Disability Resource Services come to college with a diagnosed disability. Others are referred by professors and instructors when a student experiences difficulties in class. Reinert or another staff member gives them preliminary testing before they meet with a counselor off campus who may make a diagnosis.

Reinert says it's rewarding to see students relieved once a diagnosis is made. "It gives them hope to find out what's been going on all these years," she explains.

Once the diagnosis is made, Reinert and her staff members help the student make arrangements in their classes, which may be a notetaker, a book on tape, or a special test setting. "Your disability isn't your fault, it's your responsibility," Reinert tells her students. But at the same time, she stresses that the office is there to help them achieve.

Stephanie Hammes, a former student of Reinert's

who graduated in 1993, agrees. "June is very nurturing, but she and her staff also show you how to do things on your own which is important for later in life," says Hammes. While deciding where to go to college, she visited universities throughout the state and found that this didn't happen everywhere.

Hammes, who has dyslexia, was able to work with faculty to make special arrangements on her own by her senior year. She's now back on campus earning a master's degree.

Reinert and her staff also work with faculty and academic staff to make arrangements that satisfy both the student and the teacher. She has simple advice to all staff: "You don't have to know if they have a disability," she explains. "Just treat everyone with respect."

To help staff do that, Reinert led the way for publication of the "Disability Resource Services Manual," which covers the laws regarding equal access to education, as well as tips on providing more accessible education to students with disabilities. She and staff members also hold workshops and presentations throughout campus.

Reinert began her career as an elementary teacher and soon began working with students with disabilities. After earning a master's degree, she assisted college students at UW-Parkside before moving to La Crosse.

Reinert has enjoyed her job at UW-L since her first day in the mid-80s. "This job ties together all my skills," she explains. "It's been very challenging and I've never been bored."

Reinert finds great satisfaction in helping students who were told they would never make it through high school, much less college, succeed — often above average. The word is out about the personal touch her office gives, and UW-L's reputation is bringing more students with disabilities to campus. "These comments give me a sense of pride in this office and for all those who work here," notes Reinert.



Profile

Name: June Reinert

UW-L Position: Coordinator, Disability Resource Services since 1986

Education: Bachelor's in elementary education, Ohio Dominican College, 1966; Master's in special education, Bowling Green State University, 1970

Known as: Advocate for students with disabilities.