

(This “sampler” of The Last Word offerings from Fall, 2016, is provided to show the range of topics covered in the posts, and the general writing style and tone of the essays.)

August 12, 2016

In Praise of DSS “Athletes”

OK, I admit it. I am an Olympics junkie. I didn't say I apologized for it, I just said I admit it. I have spent much of the last week glued to the TV, watching coverage of the games from Rio. I am fascinated by the skill, the determination, and the dedication of these athletes from around the world who have focused for so very long on that single opportunity to perform in their sport and to be recognized among the best-of-the-best. And let's face it... it has been a very satisfying week to be a US citizen and see our athletes compete and succeed on an international stage.

I was afraid that my fascination with the Olympic games would so interfere with my productivity that I wouldn't get anything put together for this Friday offering. But then I realized that there was a natural extension of this week's focus into the DSS world. There has been some talk on the DSSHE-L in recent days about reviving the idea of certification, in order to enhance the visibility and credibility of DSS providers in the world of higher education. I am not a fan of certification (I **HATE** the idea, for reasons that I'll go into another time!), but if what you are after is recognition for what we do and how we do it – for OUR skill, determination, and dedication – then perhaps the answer is right in front of us just now. We need our own Olympiad! For what it is worth, here are some suggestions for events you may wish to start training for now, in preparation for the 2020 DSSlympics.

The Legal Gymnastics venue offers a number of signature events for our DSSlympians. The Balance Beam competition looks to see how adept the DSS provider is at walking the very thin line between access and success. Athletes get higher scores when they show they are able to bend over backwards, jump up and down, and stretch in agonizing directions, all without losing their balance. Then we move to the Uneven Bars, when participants need to show fluid transitions between the high bar (ADA/504) and the low bar (FHA, 508, and more), knowing instinctively when it is time to jump from one to the other, and being able to demonstrate great flexibility in working around these laws, all without losing your grip on the basics. The Vault event is judged almost exclusively on how firmly participants are able to “stick” their landing. No matter how high you jump, or how many twists and turns you work in along the way (in considering a course of action or an accommodation request), the real question is whether you can come to a solid conclusion and stand your ground without moving. The Floor Exercises present a unique challenge to DSS athletes. It isn't the skills that one must show in turning somersaults, or doing back flips, jumps, and twists in applying 504/ADA, all while interpreting the rhythm of the music and staying inside bounds (of the law). The challenge comes from the inconsistent scoring often shown by the panel of (federal) judges, that includes a representative from OCR, one from DOJ, and one from the

Federal bench. Participants in this competition need to recognize that no matter how much skill they demonstrate or how consistent their performance, the judges may disagree among themselves. Such is life.

While it is expected that the Legal Gymnastics events will be dominated by experienced service providers with considerable practice behind them, the Diving events are likely to be won primarily by enthusiastic newcomers who aren't afraid to dive in, head first, to get the job done. As opposed to the Olympics, when divers earn points for making as small a splash as possible, our DSSlympians will be encouraged to dive with style and make a BIG splash, to make their presence known on campus. The other diving event of note is the Synchronized Diving event, remarkable because it is the one competition that requires the participation of a non-DSS partner. The DSS leader of the pair may choose to bring along someone from Residence Life, from IT, from Student Services, or even an administrator. The area of focus of the partner is not important. What IS important is that the two divers are perfectly in sync and able to match both their rhetoric and their actions.

The Equestrian events of the Rio Olympics will be replaced by the Zoological competitions in the DSSlympics. The term *dressage* translates as "training", and in the equestrian events it refers to a highly technical form of riding, done within carefully controlled parameters. In the DSSlympics, the *Dressage* event will test the skill of DSS providers in asking "the two questions" (and any allowable follow up) and determining whether the animal is, or is not, a service animal. Meanwhile, instead of the Steeplechase, DSS providers can enter the Snake Chase – a free-for-all kind of event to see how quickly the DSS provider can find and contain an escaped snake in the Residence Hall. (By the way, in order to make the finals and have a chance to demonstrate your prowess in the Snake Chase, you must first participate in the event's "compulsory skills" exhibition, sorting out bogus ESA documentation from the real thing.)

Track and field events will test DSS providers in a variety of ways. Running the Hurdles will see DSS providers jumping over faculty members randomly placed at intervals along the track. While the athlete can choose to skip a jump and simply run around the side of a hurdle placed in their path, doing so will lose them points in the final scoring. The High Hurdles present a similar challenge, except that runners are trying to navigate a path strewn with administrators, institutional policies, and college attorneys. In the high hurdles, obstacles cannot be ignored. They must be faced, and failure to get past any one obstacle will disqualify the athlete in that round.

Meantime, the frequent and important challenge of creating alternate media translates to several DSSlympic events. The Alt Media Sprint pushes athletes to demonstrate their creativity in finding quick solutions for last minute requests/needs. In contrast, the Alt Media Marathon is a test of strategy, policies, and persistence in setting up a viable system for moving a large number of alt media requests through the system expediently.

The Pole Vault event of the Olympics is replaced by the Captioning Hoops in the DSSlympics. Athletes compete to see who can jump through the various hoops (of different sizes), placed all over the playing field (necessitating a great deal of running around), in order to accomplish all the steps in identifying the need, getting permission, creating a transcript, finding a vendor, and getting a captioned video in place for use by deaf students.

[It should be noted that, to date, the organizers have resisted suggestions to include throwing events – Discus, Hammer, Javelin, Shot Put. There seems to be some disagreement as to whether athletes would be aiming for a neutral target or be allowed to identify the picture of someone specific to aim for (which is the way athletes practice this skill, in secret, on their home campus).]

The most noteworthy Cycling competition is the Universal Design Stationary Bike. DSS athletes disseminate information to as many folks as possible, as fast as they can (just keep on pedaling!) during a prescribed time period. A stationary bike is used in this competition because whether or not the DSS provider makes any forward progress through their efforts is too often governed by outside forces and circumstances. It is not a part of the event scoring.

Among the more dangerous events is Canoeing. The Canoeing event starts with the DSS provider up the creek without a paddle, trying to navigate troubled waters without any support from the administration (note that DSS providers don't get to choose to participate in this event – they are entered by those same, unsupportive administrators with or without their consent). This event is particularly dangerous as the DSS provider has to be prepared to abruptly change directions or maneuver past a number of cave-ins that appear unexpectedly as a result of administrative (in)actions.

That brings us to the DSSlympic Aquatics Stadium for a variety of events that all take place in a single pool. It doesn't matter whether you are swimming the Backstroke, the Butterfly, the Breast Stroke, or Free Style (or assigning Extended Time, Notetakers, Assistive Technology, or Adaptive Testing). It doesn't matter whether you are swimming an individual medley, or whether you are lucky enough to approach the accommodation process with a team of DSS professionals behind you. You are still going to be swimming back and forth in the same pool, event after event, throughout the competition – and once you get back home to your campus. In OUR swimming events, it isn't speed that counts, but consistency and the ability to keep your head above water no matter how many times you are asked to jump back into that pool!

There are other, less glamorous, events under consideration for our games, including Faculty Fencing, Attorney Arm Wrestling, and the very difficult Parental Pentathlon (which includes demonstration of a variety of skills in dealing with parental over involvement). There is even some talk of recognizing Role Juggling as a DSSlympic sport (especially for single practitioners from smaller campuses who wear several hats). And let's not forget the very difficult Documentation Archery contest in which competitors are under no obligation to use standard equipment or start from the same

place in order to hit a common target. The point of all this is not that these DSSlympic games will provide an opportunity to honor those among us who excel at these activities, but rather to honor ALL the DSS providers out there who expend their time and energy, EVERY DAY, not for the sake of their sport, but for the support of students with disabilities.

You ALL deserve medals.

Janie

“The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part; the essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well.” (Pierre de Coubertin, Father of the modern Olympic Games)

October 14, 2016

Not Ready to Make Nice

I read an interesting essay this week called, “What’s Nice and Not Nice About Being Nice.”

<https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/10/13/whats-nice-and-not-nice-about-being-nice-essay#.V-W0Q5uZno.gmail>

I thought it was interesting both because of what it said, and because of the realizations it led me to regarding our DSS world.

The focus of the article is on the problem that “nice” people face in academe.

“...if you read many academic blogs, you might need to be reminded that there are indeed nice people in academe, many of them women. One of the difficulties with being nice is you end up falling off people’s radar. The squeaky wheel gets grease and all that nonsense. Nice people aren’t usually very squeaky.”

The author goes on to share five basic misconceptions of “nice” people in academe:

1. Because we are nice we have no opinions, thoughts or ideas of our own.
2. Because we are nice, we will not disagree with you.
3. Because we are nice, we are doormats.
4. Because we are nice, we do not hold high standards.
5. Because we are nice, we never get angry, tired, or frustrated.

I think the article resonated with me, in part, because as I think of the many colleagues I have known and interacted with in the world of DSS over the years, the vast majority are folks I would describe as “nice.” (There are exceptions, of course. A friend once suggested that “you have a very short shit list, but it is written in stone.” Hey... go back and read **MIS**conception #5, above.) But if *I* perceive most of the DSS providers I

know as “nice” people, I wonder if they aren’t perceived that way on their own campuses, as well. And I wonder if that sometimes hampers our effectiveness.

I think most DSS providers operate on the idea that it is easier to be seen as collegial and cooperative when you need to get something done on campus. And, indeed, that has always been my impression. But if what YOU see as “being cooperative” is perceived by others as being a doormat, does that perception lessen the likelihood that your agenda will receive the full attention it deserves?

I suppose this part jumped out at me because in the last few weeks, I have had occasion to be the listener for several DSS professionals (both newbies and experienced) who were angry, tired, AND frustrated at what was happening (or NOT happening) on their campus, and who felt that no one there was listening to them. My impression from their description and from answers to the questions I posed was that they were correct. No one was listening to them. But why not? They were right. Their concerns were real (and in two cases, pretty urgent), but they couldn’t get anyone on campus to pay attention. I made some suggestions and, I hope, was able to help them think through some strategies. And it isn’t all that uncommon, over the years, to find myself “talking someone down off the ledge” of their career in disability services – people who were so unhappy with what wasn’t happening that they were considering throwing in the towel. Most of the time, all it takes to get them to back away slowly is to remind them of all the good they accomplish DAILY for students with disabilities on their campus, and not to lose sight of that. But is it possible that maybe, just maybe, if they were not quite so “nice”, people would listen a little harder, or a little sooner, to what they have to say?

I had gotten that far in my thinking when I went back to read the essay again, and found this:

“I don’t mean to imply that there aren’t any nice guys. I know and work with them, too, but their perceived niceness often seems to be an unmitigated asset, something that increases their standing and raises their value as a colleague. But for academic women, being nice is complicated by some troubling misconceptions about who we are and how we should act. When we don’t live up to the expectations of what a “nice girl” should do and/or be, real tension arises.”

And that is when it struck me – most of the “nice” people I know in the world of DSS are women, because most of the PEOPLE I know in the world of DSS are women. Come on – admit it. When was the last time you went to a professional meeting of DSS types when there weren’t noticeably more women in the room than men? I am not casting aspersions on the men in our field. They are certainly “nice” people, too (is this where I say, “some of my best friends are…”?). It isn’t either their fault or their responsibility that there are many more women in our field. By why is that, do you suppose?

I was reminded of a presentation I went to more than 30 years ago, given by a “Women in Business” group in the area. The title of the presentation was, “Why Women Don’t

Make Good Managers.” The speaker wasn’t talking about limited skill or ability or even training that held women back from being successful in managerial positions. It was about the societal expectations and roles that are ingrained in women that keep them from approaching their role in the same way that men do.

Two points made in that long-ago lecture have stuck with me all this time. The first is that “women don’t go into business and management areas as frequently because *nice* girls go into helping fields like Special Education.” The speaker specifically used Special Education as her example. And what is it that we are doing in DSS work (but at the college level)? I think most of the DSS folks I know have come to the field for very good reasons and stay because they feel they are making a difference, and I respect them for it. But is it also possible that we unconsciously saw this as a field that would be a good “fit” for us, because we are “nice” people?

The second statement had to do with women in business (or in life?) not being aggressive enough when it came to sticking up for themselves professionally. The speaker said that women are generally uncomfortable asking for, or demanding, more salary because, “*Nice* girls don’t hustle for money. You KNOW what kind of girls hustle for money.”

Now, remember – this was more than 30 years ago. I do believe that women’s equity has come a long way in terms of equal pay for equal work. But does it matter if we are getting paid the same thing as our male counterparts if NONE of us are getting paid very much? The issue may not be whether we are undervalued as individuals, but whether what we DO is undervalued within the institutional structure, and we are willing to accept that. (Hey... maybe in our world it isn’t the men holding the women back – maybe the women are holding the men back! As long as DSS work is seen as “soft”, will we ever get the respect we deserve?)

And then I had another of those “aha” experiences. I got to thinking about the career path of the “nice” folks I know in DSS work. I know some folks who have spent their entire careers working on one campus, in the DSS office. And they are talented professionals, with great skills, for whom I have tremendous respect. I don’t think there is anything wrong in nurturing a program (and the students who are part of it) over the long haul. Then, again, I know of folks who have moved from one DSS position to another over time, usually taking on more challenges and greater responsibility with every move. I am sure that is tremendously satisfying.

And then there are some who have moved up within the institutional hierarchy and gone into administration at their institutions (not just department heads, but administrative positions as Assistant Deans, Deans, and such). And, guess what? As I thought about those who have been recognized in such a visible way for their ability to do more, be more, I thought of six people off the top of my head – *and five of them are men*. I’m not quite sure what to make of that statistic, considering the relative numbers of men and women in our field.

I am not sure where to go with all this introspection. I guess, I realized yet, again, that the people who populate our professional world are incredibly capable and effective, and that nobody knows it but us. I think we have to work on our image, folks. Perhaps we should revisit that theme at some later date.

Janie

The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.

I know what I bring to the table, so trust me when I say I am not afraid to eat alone!

November 18, 2016

What is Your “Deep Story?”

I am going to make you work for this one. In order to set the stage for what I wanted to share with you today, you have to do some background reading. Go read the first four or five paragraphs of this essay, and get a feel for the concept of a “deep story” as we are going to use the term:

<http://tinyurl.com/DSSdeepstory>

Are you back? Good. Then let's talk about the deep stories that exist in our DSS world. Last week, I said (in part):

But what is the war we are waging, you ask? Ah... that becomes harder to define. It isn't that we don't have the same goal in mind as soldiers in this fight. We all want to see people with disabilities have full and equal opportunities in our society. But how we channel those important leadership qualities and traits will be largely dependent on how and why we believe we should engage in the battle. When we move toward a common goal from very different starting points, it isn't surprising that we may sometimes cross, erase, or trample one another's footsteps along the way. And THAT will be the topic of next week's The Last Word.

And here we are!

Have I mentioned that I track a lot of professional listservs? And that I am in touch with a whole of DSS folks through my constant stream of email and phone calls, consulting and technical assistance? Over time, I see certain themes (deep stories) emerge from folks that seem to color how they view both their responsibilities and their surroundings. The themes are not consistent across DSS providers, but they tend to be consistent WITHIN those individuals (that is, their deep story tends to regularly color their view of what they, and others, are doing). As I read those many listservs and listen in on many professional conversations, I am beginning to see how Matt Reed's opening line plays out for us in this field. “When deep stories collide, the scene isn't pretty.”

Before I share some of my observations, I want to remind you of something else Reed said. The deep story isn't meant to be literally true. The deep story is "the default structure within which people organize new experiences and information." I should also preface my remarks by saying that I have tremendous respect for, and faith in, people whom I identify with each of these deep stories. There is no greater or lesser merit to any one position, just a difference in philosophy and practice. (So I'll present them in alphabetical order!)

Those who hold the **Civil Rights** deep story often see themselves as the purists in the world of DSS and the only ones who really understand what the whole field is all about. (NOTE: I think this is MY deep story, and so I am having a difficult time finding fault! GRIN) They believe that the intent of Section 504 and the ADA is to assure equal access to opportunity, but not to provide any kind of benefit or extra consideration for people with disabilities (as they are capable of doing what others can do, given an equal chance). This stripped down view of the intent of the laws can lead to significant clashes with DSS providers who hold other deep stories and don't shy away from offering a little extra help if it will mean that students with disabilities succeed and thrive.

Some DSS providers seem to hold onto the **Dancing-As-Fast-As-I-Can** story. They might be characterized as being in a constant state of internal panic, as they worry whether they are doing the right thing, and doing it as well as the next person could. Ironically, they are almost always among the most conscientious and dedicated service providers I know, and while they may not always have the answers they need, they are great at asking questions of others that will lead them to those answers. They need more confidence, not competence – they already have that!

Then there are those who hold the **DSS Vishnu** deep story. "Vishnu is the Hindi Preserver or Sustainer of life with his steadfast principles of order, righteousness, and truth. When these values are under threat, Vishnu emerges out of his transcendence to restore peace and order on earth." In the DSS world, our Vishnus are the folks who benevolently seek to share their experience and expertise with us lesser mortals – whether we asked for it or not. Their sharing is ALWAYS done with the best of intentions, and more often than not it is on target in terms of what advice they have to share. That doesn't make it any less annoying.

The **Legal-Eagle** deep story suggests that everything that should be done in the field of disability services can be traced directly back to the law/statutes. The problem is that folks who hold this deep story ALSO believe that everyone else is as tied to the law/statute as they are – or should be! As a result, they often gloss over, or refuse to acknowledge practical obstacles to action because, "the law says you have to!" Unfortunately, if the Dean says you DON'T have to, there will be a kind of cognitive dissonance that can be both paralyzing and destructive. While the service provider waits for the right thing to happen because "it says so in the law," the student goes unsupported and the Dean gets very ticked off. Occasionally, you will also find a Legal Eagle on the listserv who states very firmly that any legal interpretation that doesn't

make sense to him/her must be a misinterpretation. (*Um... who said the law was always going to make sense?*)

Those who hold the **Social Justice** deep story often find the Civil Rights proponents to be lacking in their depth of understanding about the “true problem.” The Social Justice folks are not satisfied with equal access. They strive for respect and acceptance and full (and true) parity in the treatment of people with disabilities in our society. It is certainly a noble goal, but difficult to legislate, as it requires changing the *perceptions* of others, not just their actions.

The **Universal-Design-As-The-End-All-Be-All** deep story is probably an offshoot of the Social Justice deep story. The difference is that the Universal Design enthusiasts believe that respect, acceptance, and full parity for people with disabilities would follow automatically from strict adherence by the world, at large, to principals of universal design – and that is all that is needed. Universal Design would fix everything if only people would get on board. These folks live in a constant state of frustration because the rest of the world can’t see the simplicity and beauty of this answer.

Those who hold the **Weary Warrior** deep story rarely start out there. They start with a different deep story but eventually find themselves worn down by constant struggle to get everything done with limited resources and (too often) spotty administrative support. They have done, and continue to do, everything to assure that the students they serve have the access they need. But they are tired. Very tired. The biggest danger is that they will start to perform mechanically and disengage from the caring (and energy) that has marked their careers in DSS.

There are certainly more deep stories in the world of DSS (I just flashed on “...*there are eight million stories in the Naked City...*”). But those listed above give us enough variation to take a look at what happens when “deep stories collide.”

Scenario 1: Someone puts out a call on the listserv for ideas for simulation exercises that might be useful for an upcoming presentation to faculty and staff about students with disabilities on campus.

Civil Rights: “Look for simulations that include a chance to experience the functional limitation with and without accommodation. You want them to recognize that accommodations make it possible for swd to do what everyone else can do.”

Dancing-As-Fast-As-I-Can: “Who has time for faculty/staff inservice?!?”

DSS Vishnu: “Let me share with you what we tried last year. It was very successful and I know you can make it work for you.”

Legal Eagle: “Don’t bother. Your time would be better spent making them understand that they don’t have a choice. They MUST provide accommodations under the law, so get used to it!”

Social Justice: “Simulation exercises are insulting to people with disabilities. Faculty and staff can’t possibly understand what it means to be a person with a disability from some frivolous little activity. Instead, let them listen to students with disabilities talk about their experience – their REAL experience.”

Universal Design: “Show them how to design a test or an exercise using the principles of Universal Design, instead. Model the behavior you want them to be following.”

Weary Warrior: “_____” (They don’t answer, because they are too tired to care. Been there, done that!”)

Or how about this?

Scenario 2: Professor Smith receives a Letter of Accommodation for John Doe, assigning double time for testing (and giving information on how/where the tests should be sent to have them appropriately monitored). The student returns to the DSS office and says that Professor Smith flatly refused. He says that John Doe won’t have “extra time” in the workplace and that it is in his best interest to learn to do things in the same amount of time everyone else does.

Civil Rights: Contacts Professor Smith and reminds him that institutional rules say the accommodations assigned by the DSS office must be granted unless the prof wants to take it up through appropriate channels through the grievance process. Assuming that is not the case, let’s make sure all the arrangements are in place to get the student the double time on exams.

Dancing-As-Fast-As-I-Can: Immediately sends an email off the to professional listserv saying, “I assigned double time for this student because of this, this, and this, but the faculty member says it isn’t appropriate. Was I wrong in assigning this?”

DSS Vishnu: Contacts Professor Smith and says, “you MUST provide the extended time because I said so, and you have to follow my orders.” Then he gets on the listserv to respond to **Dancing** and says, “Let me tell you about how I dealt with a stubborn professor just last month...”

Legal Eagle: Assures the student that he WILL get the accommodation, because the law says he is entitled to it. Then sends a second copy of the same LOA to the faculty member with a cover note that (essentially) says, “I’m not asking you, I’m telling you. If you don’t give him the extended time, you are gonna get sued.”

Social Justice: Sees an opportunity for a “teachable moment” and makes an appointment to go see Professor Smith to explain, in detail, the purpose of providing the accommodation and the ethical implications of not cooperating. Professor Smith gives in just to get the Social Justice provider out of his face.

Universal Design: Sees an opportunity for a “teachable moment” and makes an appointment to go see Professor Smith and explain, in detail, how there is a better way to test all students, using Universal Design, so that the problem wouldn’t exist. When Professor Smith blows her off, the service provider complains to the Department Chair who intervenes and says, “just give him the extended time!”

Weary Warrior: Makes a phone call to Professor Smith and listens to him vent for 5 minutes about all these “so called disabled kids” who get special favors and how it didn’t used to be that way. Then WW gets the prof to agree to give the kid the extra time. Then she sighs heavily.

As noted, each of the deep stories leads folks to take alternative paths toward the same goal... and some of the paths that others take will seem wrong or illogical to their colleagues with a different deep story.

I suppose this isn’t really a plea for anyone to change their deep story – just a reminder to be aware of how your own deep story colors both your actions and your responses. We all strive to respect the individual differences presented by students with disabilities. We need to work equally hard, sometimes, to respect the differences among our peers.

Janie

Deep stories create the emotional context people need to locate themselves in a larger experience.

It isn’t easy recognizing a deep story in a shallow social media world.

Whenever there is a big story in the media, look for the deep story they are trying to distract you from.
