

Article 19 – Higher Education and The ADA

Speakers: Marty Molloy, Harper Yatvin, Erin Leuthold, Nimit Kaur

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Recording:

Expression is one of the most powerful tools we have, a voice, a pen, a keyboard. “The real change which must give to people throughout the world their human rights, must come about in the hearts of people. We must want our fellow human beings to have rights and freedoms which give them dignity.” Article 19 is the voice in the room.

Marty:

Hello, and welcome to Article 19. My name is Marty Molloy, president at Tamman, and I’m the host for our conversation today. I am joined by my colleague Harper Yatvin, who's going to do his best to keep me on track today. Harper, how are you doing my friend?

Harper:

Hello, Marty. I’m doing rather excellent. It's great to be here today.

Marty:

I think this is the first time we've ever recorded on a Monday. This is a Monday recording, getting the week started off. I’m excited about it.

Harper:

It sets a great tone for the week.

Marty:

Yeah, it does. This is my favorite thing to do in my job. I have told many people I love Article 19. Today, I love it because we get to talk to two amazing women. Our guests today are both from Rutgers University-Camden. Erin Leuthold is the director of disability services at Rutgers-Camden. And we are also joined by returning guest, sometimes co-host, and all around amazing Tamman contributor, Nimit Kaur. I cannot thank both of you for stepping away from your very busy worlds and joining us to educate us a little bit today.

Nimit:

Thank you.

Erin:

Yes, thank you.

Marty:

Before we get into the heavy questions and things, Erin, you connected us originally to the incomparable Nimit car several years ago, Tamman has been forever changed for the better because of it. But I want to start with you a little bit. Can you tell us about your professional journey? How did you come to be working with students with disabilities in the Higher Ed space?

Erin:

It is an interesting trajectory. I am originally from upstate New York, Rochester specifically, where I was a schoolteacher in the Rochester city school district. Kind of a K through 12 background experience. But primarily, I spent the most years teaching high school students, and I was a Special Education teacher. I taught everything from year to year. Love, love, love teaching, the dynamic classroom environment, the students are amazing, their families. And then my husband got a job offer in Philadelphia. And it was really amazing. And I was like, "I don't really want to leave. But I can teach anywhere." Here we are, just outside of Philadelphia, I'm also a mom to four amazing teenage sons. And at the time we moved down here, they were quite young. I did not go immediately back into the classroom, as I thought I would. I ended up an adjunct professor at Camden County College in the Garden State Pathways program, which was an amazing first introduction to Higher Ed. And I was like, "You know what? They're like teenagers 2.0 in college. And this is a really cool environment. And I can see myself here." The life of an adjunct is difficult. From semester to semester, I would have maybe one class, maybe three classes. That was a little bit challenging. Then I found a position in disability services at a small liberal arts institution in Philly. And from there, I've just kind of grown in this role. And I love it. And I love it so much. Marty, I think this is new to you. I'm actually in law school now at Rutgers-Camden. I'm kind of on my third iteration of myself professionally. And so, the journey continues.

00:03:41

Marty:

The journey continues. I love that. Congratulations.

Erin:

Thank you.

Marty:

I have no idea how you do it all. But that might be for another podcast, for sure.

Erin:

There you go. There's your next topic.

Nimit:

Nimit, I want to bring you in. You have been an undergrad, now a graduate student, you're also an employee working with the Office of Disability Services.

Marty:

Can you talk a little bit about the process and how it's been on your end, going from sort of a user of services to a provider of services, and what that journey has been?

Nimit:

In terms of the provider side, I've always seen the impact of disability services in my own experience coming from K through 12, and also then coming to college and continuing, and also seeing how much of a culture shock it can be going from high school Special Ed to college, where the resource are there, but it's very broad. And you have to go there. Seeing that, when I entered college, I've always been drawn to the passion of being able to help other students understand it before they experience such shock. Because it is very different, when you come from a very supportive high school to a college where you're supposed to do everything on your own. And it's just very different. I wanted to be working in the field where I can make a firsthand impact, because I've seen how much of an impact disability services made for me. Even when I was in my undergrad years, I kept bugging, "Erin, can you hire me? Can you give me volunteer opportunities?" She's like, "Keep contacting me." I kept contacting her. And then finally, I made it here. That's because I wanted to give back, give back to what I've experienced to other students.

Marty:

That's fantastic. And it doesn't surprise me that you have a persistence about you. That is unique, I would say, and I think it's a strength for you, for sure. I want to begin to provide listeners, depending on how people come to Article 19, they may or may not have a strong grounding in the Americans with Disabilities Act. Erin, I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about, from a broad, big picture perspective, how do you and university more broadly ensure compliance with the ADA and other disability related laws and regulations that may exist?

00:06:10

Erin:

Yes, I can. And you said it, it's compliance. We're a compliance-based office. Nimit and I work at the Rutgers-Camden campus, however, each Rutgers campus has an Office of Disability Services, we all work very closely together, our processes, our policies are all consistent across the big university. And we empower our students in what I like to call, because I had to do this myself, I very much firsthand understand the retraining of your brain that needs to happen coming from the K through 12 to Higher Ed, there's different laws that govern both educational environments, and providing that education to our students, no matter what level they are when they come in, whether they're first year students, transfer students, grad students, because we all know, disability can occur at any time in our life, change in health can occur at any time in our life. Having the whole campus be aware of our office, of our services. And my philosophy is, yes, we are a confidential office, however, there is a lot that we could talk about. We need to educate the community on our process, and how to interact with this office and increased transparency, so the campus community feels comfortable and knows how to refer students to us. The laws are also constantly evolving in the interpretation of – especially, the

pandemic really changed the way education looked in our environment. And we really needed to quickly adapt.

Marty:

Can I stop you there for a second? Because I'm interested in that. Specific to your office's experience, what are some of the things that the pandemic did for students with disabilities and how you were able to serve them, or struggle to serve them?

00:08:02

Erin:

Looking back, I feel like the first thing that we had to do because we were mid semester was figure out, we're going to be remote, and for students who – I'm just going to use the example of, they are screen reader users, there were certain programs that did not communicate with screen readers. We had two, as the Office of Disability Services, in person proctor students taking an exam that was in an unsecure format. How do we do that online now? We had to really figure – we basically worked so many hours during that spring break, during March of 2020, to figure out, how do we come back and seamlessly get this in place for our students, and educate the faculty on how do you implement this accommodation now? At Rutgers, as I explained, we have Office of Disability Services at each campus, then we have a central unit called RADAR, which is Rutgers Access and Disability Resources. I think Nimit can also attest, we have some incredibly talented colleagues. And I will say about all of us, we are problem solvers, and we come up with creative solutions every day. We built mock systems to test out these exams and make sure that they did in fact communicate with the screen reading software. Now another thing was, because everyone was online, in any program, many schools were using these like browser lockdown software programs, which were incredibly anxiety inducing for some people. There was a huge influx of students that we're managing and never needed to disclose and reach out for services from the office. We saw a large influx of students initially, and then about six months into the pandemic, we started to see another influx of students who were experiencing challenges with their mental health, loneliness, isolation, you name it. And so, I feel we're finally at a point where we can look back and kind of learn from that experience. You know though, Marty? For some students, online learning was amazing. We work with students who have physical disabilities, and they were like not having to deal with getting to campus, parking, getting into the building. That was amazing. And so, there were some people that this was amazing, and they want to keep online learning, and keep that as their educational path. And for other students, it was a disaster. It's just this huge spectrum and just depends on each person's experience.

Marty:

It's interesting to me that you started off at the very beginning saying that it's all about compliance. And yet, everything that you've just talked about is about the humans who are in the office, in the chairs, supporting students, taking it, and what does that translation really look like? Sure, there's this big compliance umbrella, but it really is. And I see the passion and I hear the passion in your voice, what it is that you're doing. Nimit, throughout air and talking

about that, and I didn't really mean to make this all about the pandemic, but this is one of those fun rabbit holes that we're gonna go ahead and do for a minute, you were nodding your head, you were smiling. I don't recall, were you just finishing up your undergrad, or had you just started your graduate? Where were you in your process as a student when the pandemic hit, and everything went online?

00:11:26

Nimit:

That was my last year, actually second year for undergrad at Rutgers. I started in 2019, same year Erin joined Rutgers, actually. And then by 2020, I was finishing up that year, going into my second year. I remember when everything just shut down. And in the beginning, it was a challenge because nobody had experienced online learning. There was just like a chaos in the beginning with a lot of people, teachers, and professors, and students learning. And I agree to everything that Erin said, when it comes to testing browsers. I experienced this, where my screen reader was like a phone. The testing browser thought my screen reader to be mechanism for cheating. Every time I would download this software to do my test, it would literally turn off [inaudible sounds like: johns 00:12:27], which is useless for me. It was just like presenting that challenge. I remember working with the office with Erin, and Taryn, and Gabby, the other two awesome colleagues that we work with. They worked with me. I Zoom screenshared my screen with them, so they could see what I was doing, but I could use my screen reader also in a proctored environment. Just like coming up with creative solutions for when there was no guidance, there was no book on how to run a pandemic disability services office, it was really cool to see. And then when it came to experiences in general, I definitely felt the anxiety in the beginning of the pandemic when everything was switched to online, because I'm a person who needs to be moving. And I find it hard to balance myself and make myself a routine in the beginning. But eventually, I learned to actually like the online learning path, because it saves me a lot of commute time. And with public paratransit systems, one simple commute of one hour can turn into three hours. And that's just one round of trips. Considering that, they really saved me a lot of commute time, and it's the reason why I'm able to do three things, four things, like classes, tabbing, Rutgers, and my MSW field. That's the only reason why I'm able to do – because I don't have to travel. And that way, I began to take the pandemic – it was tough for so many people and even for me, but just the good things that it really did bring for some people, I [crosstalk 00:14:23].

Marty:

I appreciate all of that. And it makes me think about the fact that I got my master's degree out at Cal State Northridge. And for some of our older listeners, there was a giant earthquake centered in Northridge, which is in the San Fernando Valley, years ago, and it just leveled the campus. And what they had to do is, this is in the early 90s, they had to digitize their library because they needed to get back up and running quickly. And then in the late 90s, early 2000s, as a graduate student, I was able to access everything in their library in a way that was really innovative for the time, and could keep working, and all the things you were just saying, Nimit,

specifically because of this other disaster that had happened. And it amazes me the resilience of institutions, and institutions that are focused on people first. Harper, you had a question.

00:15:12

Harper:

Thank you, Marty. This is a question for both of you, both Erin and Nimit. When you have a large-scale disaster like the pandemic, or just in general, when you say that things need to be compliant across the board, does that mean that all higher education, universities, and colleges, do they all have to have the same set of digital accessibility and disability ways to assist people, the same digital accessibility and disability laws?

Marty:

If I understand you correctly, what you're thinking about is like, does a place at Rutgers, which is a state university, land grant type university, do they have the same requirements as say, a small liberal arts private school in Rochester, New York? Is that what you mean? Is it the same across the board?

Harper:

Yes. Do they have the same requirements, compliance standards, as University of California, Northridge, or University in Nebraska?

Marty:

Great question. Erin, I don't know. I see you shaking your head, "Yes." It's the same for everyone because it's a federal law?

Erin:

Yes, and if an institution accepts federal financial aid, that is what is tied to being compliant with the ADA. Now, even a private institution, if the institution accepts federal dollars, then they are held accountable to the compliance of ADA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Fair Housing Act, you name it. Something I've learned in the last 10 years of working in disability services is that the bar for compliance is actually pretty low. And so that, in my opinion, is the floor, not the ceiling. Like you were saying, Marty, we work with people. That's just not something that I would be comfortable with, just simply meeting that level of compliance. So, Yes. Now there is also language about what's reasonable and what's unreasonable. And that's a kind of separate – I could talk at length about that. But yes, to answer your question on the very simple level, if there is such a thing, if the institution accepts federal financial dollars, and is a public institution, then yes.

Harper:

What can really push a university such as Rutgers, with the RADAR program, to really take that next step to be much closer to the ceiling than the base required floor?

Erin:

There are offices, such as OCR, the Office for Civil Rights, there is the Department of Justice, that if they receive a complaint, which you literally just can go to the website and file a complaint against anyone and anything, that could potentially be investigated. And it's not like OCR or DOJ will just come in and look at one specific thing. If they choose to investigate, they're going to look at many things. And so, that's the compliance piece. However, word of mouth, we know word of mouth can work for you or against you. And so, it is just who we are here, I can speak to Camden and my colleagues at the other campuses, RADAR, we all care. There's typically a general theme, even when I go to conferences, or meet other people who work in this field, there's often a very personal reason of what led you down this path. And so, we want to provide an amazing experience for our students.

00:18:23

Marty:

That makes sense. No Kaurots, only sticks, but powerful sticks no doubt, when you're talking about the Department of Justice.

Nimit:

Also, I really agree to the compliance bar and the word of mouth, because as a student, and I see this now with being an office assistant, when people – typically, when I'm working on the first contract, sometimes students with disabilities, or students who have had IEPs, which includes me, we have used college's disability services, as a way to decide where to go. Honestly, I came from Camden County College, which was a one-person office, to Rutgers, which is highly centralized with a really good process and system. And I see this with other students who reach out, who just want to like talk to us and basically ask us what we do, how we do, we can't give them individual answers, because everything is highly individualized and it's just hard to say. Just by interacting with people, just seeing how friendly a team is, just seeing their response rates, that makes a huge difference when applying or deciding to go to a certain college. I guess an indirect incentive. I don't know if that's the right word, could be for if their offices are responsive and friendly, students are more likely to go there, which is also going to affect their finances in the end.

Marty:

That really leads me to my next question, which is around the fact that the Office of Disability Services is, even at their best, only a small group of people. And that students are working with so many other people across the campus, and specifically faculty members. And coming in as an adjunct, Erin, you've been on both sides of that fence in Higher Ed. Can you talk a little bit about working with faculty and making sure that course materials, or testing procedures, or any other forms of instruction and exam taking, that it's accessible for students? What do you do around that? Because no matter what you do, if you have a sort of, I would imagine grumpy, obstinate, whatever the word would be, faculty member, or a faculty member who just doesn't care as much for this particular issue, that's got to be challenging. What do you do?

00:20:45

Erin:

Yes. We do so much outreach, and we go to many events. Again, having 10 years of experience working in this role, not always as a director, I was a coordinator, then I was an assistant director, now director, and also at different institutions, which is always helpful, because you have different ideas that you can take here, and they may be nuanced, but you've got ideas. You need to share information. Again, what I have come to very clearly understand is, when you work at a small, confidential office, unless someone has actually done this work, there's a lot of mystery, and there is no reason for that. Any opportunity that we can share information, we take it. We do trainings, we meet with the deans every summer, and we give a breakdown of, "This is how much our caseload has grown." Caseload, meaning students registered and working with the office, receiving accommodations. And then we break it down even further to say, "This is our overall number. Now, here's the number from your school of business, school and nursing, arts and sciences, law." And then we break it down even further to say, "Undergrad, grad." Because we're seeing all of these trends. Sharing that information, and then asking the question, "Now, how do we get this to your faculty?" That usually gets us a couple of minutes on their first all-faculty meeting in the beginning of the school year, and then that typically will lead to specific department meetings, or maybe a department is seeing a large trend, such as we've seen a huge increase over the past few years in law students seeking accommodations, and PhD level students in public affairs and public policy looking for accommodations. We may do some direct outreach, like, "Hey, we were just running some numbers. And look at this, this is interesting." I'm also a big fan of – I'm on a bunch of different Listservs, I see many different like journals. And so, I'll pick an article here and there, and I'll send it to a dean, a department chair, a faculty member, "Hey, look at this, do you want to get together and talk about this? Let me know when you have some time." One of the people I work with will run a keyword search each semester, and just type in "disability". And so, any course that is being taught that semester that's talking about disability is going to come up, and then we'll direct outreach that professor and say like, "Hey, wow, this looks amazing. Do you have a couple minutes to talk about this?" That's led to maybe one of us going in and talking about something. Lots and lots of outreach, because it really helps everybody, it's providing education.

Marty:

Everything you said there makes sense also for the workplace. HR, whichever entity within a corporation might own sort of disability services, or accommodations, or anything along those lines, is such a closely guarded secret. And we tell applicants even the beginning, "Don't disclose the disability." It becomes this thing that's kept behind the wall. And if we're not building greater awareness around it, then we don't know. Before I started working at Tamman and before I started getting involved in digital accessibility, I would have thought that Jaws was only a movie. And now when I hear Nimit talk about "Jaws", I know it's a screen reader. But if you don't know, you don't know. If you've not had access to something, you don't necessarily know. I think that that makes a lot of sense. Nimit, in your experience, both student and beyond now, are there students who have needs that may not be aware that there are supports to meet those needs? And if so, how do you reach those young people who just – it's

not necessarily the faculty member now, now we're at the student level, because they have to reach out, how do you reach them?

00:24:21

Nimit:

This is interesting, because I talk about the transition from high school to college all the time, because of the experience and also my passion. But sometimes when students say – I'm using blindness as an example, because that's what I've most been exposed to. In high school, for example, they might have had someone brailing out their materials for them. And then when they come to college, this level of individualized brailing for individualized, say one on one support, may not be available. But then like teaching students, I've done this a lot to other students that I talked to, not just at Rutgers, but also outside, like in my own friend circle, or in some of the programs that I have mentored in before. Some of the students will still reach out to me and ask like, "How do I do this?" Just like knowing that you might not get braille papers per se, but you are still entitled to get accessible course materials. And then also sometimes they might need additional technology trainings, such as being able to help the student talk to their VR agency if they need extra training, or sometimes colleges, I know Rutgers RADAR would provide like a pretty good one lesson training for something if students needed to. But if they needed something long term, just figuring out their VR agency. Things like that, supports that they were used to from high school, but that might look different in college. Sometimes students don't know what to do, or how to do. It's just like listening to them, sitting with them, and kind of helping them figure all this out. I have done that with like a lot of the students that I stayed in touch with over the years, that I mentored through Learning Ally, or even the hedge program that I mentored in. It's just helping students figure out how they can still get the accommodations that they need, even though it might look just a little different. But they're still entitled, and they're still by law required to get that – the college is required to fulfill those accommodation needs.

00:26:48

Marty:

You bring up a really interesting thing, though, that might be a discrepancy between ADA digital accessibility compliance, versus what we really want to do. When we talk about digital accessibility, and having a more inclusive web, we talk about disability being permanent, temporary, episodic, or situational. I'm imagining, Erin, that situational and episodic disabilities, that may not come with other verifiable documentation [inaudible 00:27:16] that students who might be struggling with an episodic migraine disorder, but it's not like a formal diagnosis, or some other kind of – I'm trying to think of things that can be situational, or not – that it's just, "I'm sorry, we can't help you here." Or am I wrong? Is that not the case? Where is the line?

Erin:

Lots of people with migraines actually work with us. And that was another impact of the pandemic, where people were like, "I'm on my computer eight hours a day.", or whatever. We

do put plans in place for people all the time with chronic, episodic, flaring conditions as a way of being proactive because the hope is, you won't have a flare, and so you won't need these accommodations. But if you do, you're not in a good place, and having to then go through this process when you're not in a good place. This is how we talk to students when we do orientation when we do outreach. Lots of times people don't necessarily consider themselves – and I'm using air quotes, “disabled”, if they have certain health conditions, or certain conditions. And when we talk about, “What does our office do? Who do we work with?”, we always talk about, “Yes, if you have a diagnosed disability or health condition, or if you've had a change in health, or if you're not sure, just come in and talk to us. We're confidential, and you can feel comfortable having these conversations with us.” So, yes. Absolutely. Now, where let's say somebody has a temporary condition, I'll use concussions as an example. Typically, a concussion will go away in like two weeks, symptoms will subside in two weeks, but not always, especially if it's second impact, or you've had multiple concussions, or it could be your first concussion. But if somebody reaches out with what could be considered a temporary or short-term condition, we will work very closely with that student and the Dean of Students Office. Now, if it gets beyond the two weeks, it's more support than what the Dean of Students Office can provide. We are going to kind of like bring the student back in with us and see what we can do. Again, all about creative solutions. And that's where I'd say, “Just come ask.” Because I've been doing this long enough, I may hear something and I'm like, “Wait a minute. Wait, let's talk about that. Tell me more about that.”

00:29:33

Marty:

The one thing that I am stressing with my soon to be college bound daughter, is talk to your teacher, talk to adults, just talk about things. Because she is reluctant to go and advocate, seeing it as an [inaudible sounds like issue 00:29:52]. In other words, go to the math services center, go to the language arts services center, like universities have all of these helpers that are here to make your life a little bit easier and help guide you, because you don't necessarily know. And it sounds to me like this is just another example of, “Come and talk with us, and will help guide you in whatever direction is potentially best for you in what resources we have.” I want to switch around to some story time, as it were. And I'm really curious, Erin, if you have, in your many years of experience just a pride point, a point in time where you were just excited about a successful accommodation, or intervention, or a solution that was so creative? And keeping it anonymous, of course, is there anything that really sticks out for you when you're like, “Man, we crushed it with that. We did everything right with that student.” Tell me about a time when everything went kind of according to plan.

Erin:

Honestly, it may be the flip side of that, where I will be the first person to say to students, “The compelling stories that people come and tell, and also think about it, like within the first 90 seconds of meeting me, you're disclosing incredibly personal information.” And so, that is something that like we all take so seriously, and it's a privilege. It's an absolute privilege to do this work and to support the students that we work with. But I'm going to say, there's not one

particular situation, because there's just so many where I feel like the students we work with are so incredibly persistent and resilient. And what is sad to me, and I saw this for many years when I was a K through 12 teacher is the, at times, not always, but at times, there is a real negative connotation with having an IEP, having a 504, having a disability, being different. We're all different, you know what I mean? Students come in, and you feel that in the words they use, telling their story. And I am a great talker, I talk a lot, but I also can be a very good listener. When I'm listening, I'm just jotting down notes. And I always tell people, "I'm going to reframe something. Rutgers does not have a separate admissions process. Yet, here you are, despite all of these things that you just told me. You are here and you have been successful. Let's talk about that." This was part of my pedagogy as a teacher is, "OK. The way we receive a diagnosis is because of having a lower than average ability somewhere. And so, yet, what we don't always talk about is, just as you may be like lower than average somewhere, you're also above average in plenty of places. Let's talk about that. And let's use those skills to strengthen areas where you struggle." And especially at this level, the assistive technology that we have access to through our RADAR team is phenomenal. I don't have one story, I have so many. That's really just helping students kind of like reframe. And I tell people all the time because there'll be like, "I feel so much better. I was nervous to come here. And I feel so much better." And that's amazing. I tell people all the time, "Next time you are questioning or feeling something, come back and talk to me anytime, my door is always open." I hope that answers your question, even though it's not like one, it's many, so many.

00:33:10

Marty:

It does. It's spoken like a true youth development professional, is that you put it right back on the students and said, "They're so amazing. They're so great." And they are, I'm sure. But at the same time, it really helps to have a trusted confidant, and guide and guru, such as yourself, to really kind of help make that happen. Nimit, what are some of the challenges in your experience that universities are still facing, in terms of being able to fully support students with disabilities in the way that they may need?

Nimit:

I think one thing is that technology is always evolving. That's not just assistive technology, but technology in general. Being able to hedge up with and being open minded to the growing needs and different kinds of needs, especially after the pandemic, especially when we are seeing more people reaching out for help, which is great, but also some cultural differences in disabilities perceptions. I come from another culture where disability was not really valued. And it's seen almost like a pity. Hearing – and I've seen Erin do this, like I've sat into her meetings and listened in and shadowed, and I've seen her put that level of confidence in students. But sometimes students from other cultures might be hesitant to reach out because disability just wasn't really ingrained in them to be a positive effect. I've even seen that level of confidence come to students from various cultures and backgrounds, just to be able to come and ask for help. It's just good to see that level of understanding at Rutgers. But I do think that universities should keep in mind that some cultures might not view disability same as we might here, it

might be very frowned upon. Just respecting that giving people their space, not like rushing the process, sometimes universities put a lot of effort on documentation, rightfully so because of the law. But sometimes that can feel very pressurizing for people because they might not be ready to disclose such personal information. That's why I like that Erin has trained us to really turn this into a conversation with people and giving people like the space. I don't talk to students about their diagnosis because that's not my place. I only connect them with their coordinators. And I respect that. And if people open up to me, I still respect it, and I really value confidentiality. It's just universities keeping in mind, respecting people's space, and giving them that time, keeping documentations, but also not like rushing the process because of documentation, really getting to know people as people first. [crosstalk 00:36:24] any sense?

00:36:25

Marty:

That's awesome. It made unbelievable sense. And sometimes as a host of a podcast, if I may take for a minute, you direct a question to a particular person or guest, and they nail it in such a way that they give you such incredible response that you say, "Gosh, I'm amazing for having given you that question, and because that was so fantastic." Thank you for that. I want to turn now to workforce. But before I do, I want to bring in Mr. Harper.

Harper:

Just real quick. In light of the pandemic and just a more remote learning lifestyle at higher learning institutions, what are some of the most common new pieces of assistive learning technology? And what type of disability do they often address, whether it is situational, or permanent, or any other kind?

Erin:

Nimit, help me out.

Nimit:

I'm thinking of some, but I don't know if they're new, they're new to me. Like that pen that would write as you – I may not understand it correctly, though.

Erin:

Harper, records really prides itself on being an in-person research institution. They have created online sections of – because like I said, it was such a large spectrum of people, like, "We want to be back in the classroom.", and other people like, "No, I want to be able to stay home and do my studies." As far as like new technology for people doing online learning, I'm not really so sure. We do have many different, really cool assistive technology products, screen readers and different apps, and different products. What we hear from the past is, "That's so robotic, I can't even stand it, it's slow." These newer programs, that would be really expensive to go purchase a license of on your own, you don't pay for accommodations. If we loan you a screen reading software license, you don't pay for that, you use it as long as you're a student at this institution working with this office. But we also have like really cool recording devices, we have tools that

help you while you're taking notes. Again, it's one of those benefits of doing this long enough, when a student shares what is the challenge for them, or like what is the barrier, then we can figure out solutions on how to remove that barrier. I can recommend different tools and then I can connect them with someone from the assistive technology team at RADAR to do a one-on-one meeting with that student, and they do essentially an assistive tech eval. I don't know if that answers your question.

Harper:

I think that it's a great answer and very helpful one. Thank you so much both for answering it.

00:39:02

Marty:

It leads me, though, Harper, that – and this is brand spanking new, so you may not have a good answer. And this doesn't necessarily fit directly with the Office of Disability Services. However, is the university talking about ChatGPT and AI assisted language, and what that whole scape is gonna look like in the academic world? I'm just generally curious what folks at Rutgers might be saying about it.

Erin:

I have heard more about it from the school district where our kids go, but as far as like The Daily Chronicle of Higher Education, it was kind of a buzzy thing that was popping up in the daily newsletter. I'm not seeing as much now. And also, if you're going to need to like cite to something that ChatGPT is going to be a problem, because it's kind of pulling original thought, but not in a way that a human – it seems very like AI-ish. So, sure. Students are smart, and they're gonna figure out ways to do things that maybe we don't want them to and trying to just stay ahead of that.

Marty:

Have you played around with it at all?

Erin:

No.

Marty:

It's amazing. I will say it is different. And it is truly amazing. We're in for a moment where we're gonna look back and say, "That changed everything." It is interesting. But I would go in and just start playing with it. It's free. Go to openai.com. They do not sponsor this podcast, I have no affiliation with them. But it is very interesting right now of what it is doing. And I will say in full disclosure, while everything has my own tint to it, and change the foundation of every one of these questions, I said to ChatGPT, "Give me questions about ADA in Higher Ed." And this is what it turned around.

Erin:

What?

Marty:

So, it's really good. Now, it is a little, like you said, sort of AI-ey. I had to go in and then kind of pick and choose and make changes, and edits and whatnot. But it took me from what would have taken me an hour when I usually create it, to 10 minutes. It's was pretty amazing. We'll see what happens. I see it more as something that can blend, and make us better when we work together, and make things a little bit more efficient. I'm not really sure exactly how that's gonna play with assistive tech, but something to keep our eye on. Speaking of that, I want to turn to workforce development. Because I know, as we said at the beginning, your office, Erin, connected us at Tamman originally with Nimit. And the rest is history, as they say. Can you talk a little bit about, students have to come and they have to advocate, and open up and be vulnerable with you. As they're finishing up their studies, and you're looking at moving them forward in the work, one of the things that Tamman has taken on is something that is core to what is important to us and has been something we write about in our thought leadership, is the fact that thinking about groups, in general in America, eight in 10 people with disabilities are not in the American workforce right now. And if you take any other quote unquote group and put that same statistic together, there would be an uprising. And we've also been pretty open about the fact that it is the only subset of individuals, people with permanent disability specifically, where sort of a de facto discrimination is almost still allowed. And Nimit has written and talked about this for us at Tamman, as well as her colleague Kristen Roytuckey, where if Nimit as a woman who is blind, walks into a job interview, and they might think to themselves, "We're not capable of accommodating Nimit, so we're not going to bring her in.", never really giving her an opportunity to take on that role and see what she's fully capable of. What do you talk to students about? This is a real challenge in our society, and how do you help prepare them for the workforce as they leave college, and whether it's undergraduate or graduate school?

00:42:34

Erin:

I think that it's a continual learning process. When students come in from high school, a lot of times they're like, "I didn't know that I could still have accommodations in college now." And then it's that same next step, "I can use accommodations in the workplace?" As I mentioned before, we do support students, yes, here in the classroom, and housing and dining and whatever programming, to make sure there's access. However, we also work with students in clinicals, in field placement, in student teaching, any internship that they're going to. And it's really a conversation about how to disclose, is there something in universal design that can be implemented, where it doesn't need to be an ADA accommodation through the HR office? But I think it's a huge benefit to the students to talk to alum who also went through Rutgers-Camden and used accommodations. I'll just use nursing as an example. There's the NCLEX. To get your nursing license, you need to pass the NCLEX exam. And having students come back to talk to our current students about, "Hey, I used these services, too. I used accommodations on the NCLEX. Now I'm working." And what's that for them? I feel like those are really, really beneficial

conversations for our current students to hear. Like, "You just did this, and you're successful and you're working, you have accommodations on this exam, or like the Praxis exams, or LSAT, whatever it is that is next for you, we want to talk about that and support you." And while we're not necessarily the experts on that, we can connect people with someone from the community, someone from career services, a student, just to kind of get more information.

Marty:

And Nimit, I know you've, as I've already said, written and talked about this previously on Article 19. But when you hear that, if you could talk to the listeners that are out there, what's something that you would tell them when they are moving from academia into the workplace that will help make that transition smoother?

00:44:43

Nimit:

It's hard to really say one line, because that's something I'm trying to figure out myself as I'm navigating my own post educational transition. And also, it's just different each time. As I've written about it, my one experience with one employer might be completely different than one another company. One thing that I would like to tell listeners who are employers is, "Be open, but being willing to be open and asking your employees what they need, rather than assuming, be willing to ask them, how can I help you? Or what can we both do to make this process easier for you? And giving them a chance, not letting that first assumption really guide your decision making." And to employees, I would definitely say, "I know it can be sometimes daunting, and sometimes discouraging, when people say, in my position, who have gone through so much in educational training, and then to find [inaudible 00:45:53] to apply to so many jobs, and then to find out that you're being discriminated against. But also, just remember that you are valued, that you deserve respect, and even, you are allowed to be open, and you're allowed to talk about what makes you comfortable at any point in the process. There is no one rule. It's just what works for you." But basically, that's what I try to tell people who are going through this step, like, "You should be valued. If you're not valued, then," I don't want to say it.

Marty:

Then move on.

Nimit:

Yeah.

Marty:

You changed Tamman's hiring process, Nimit, in that we now, at our very first interview we talk about accommodations, and we talk about what accommodations folks might need. What I found is many people who never even thought they might need an accommodation, even in that process, we're already educating them about Tamman and having an inclusive work culture and having an inclusive web. Even if they don't need anything in that moment, they're still learning that we're putting our values up front, and we're talking about it. But we've had

folks that have said, "Video is really hard for me, would you mind?", and we will go off at it and we'll just do an audio interview. And there are different things that people then feel more empowered to ask for and talk about. I thank you because you've improved us.

Nimit:

Thank you. And also, it's also important for us as employees who are seeking accommodations at the workplace to be open, too. We have to keep in mind that that person who was interviewed has probably never met someone who, in my example, is blind. Just being willing to educate, they, "Be firm, but polite." I tend to go more on the polite side. But just being aware that this might be a first for them. Just being willing to be patient and open minded too.

Marty:

Before we get to our final questions for both of you, Erin, I want to give you that chance. We have folks that work at different employers that are listening now. If there was something that you could ask of every employer, what's one thing you would want them to change about their hiring practices, or their workplace culture? Wherever you want to take it

00:48:12

Erin:

Don't make assumptions, don't make assumptions. And asking questions is how we learn. While you may not ask somebody, "What is your disability?" You know what I mean? I think the way you're framing it, Marty, makes a lot of sense, as far as like, "Here at Tamman, we provide workplace accommodations." You know what I mean? I think that that's really great. Because while the person may not feel comfortable disclosing during an interview, at least they're thinking, "We're even talking about this on the first interview? This is amazing that this place is recognizing that people do their work differently." And again, I come back all the time, like the ultimate goal is to create universal design, and put disability services out of business, which we've got a really long way to go, and things are constantly evolving. But what may start off as an accommodation for one person, you may find actually is really great for lots of people, and people can be more productive. Again, not making assumptions, asking reasonable questions, or when I'm asking questions, again, our conversations are very detailed and personal. And I'll say, "If you don't feel comfortable sharing this with me, you don't need to. This is why I'm asking." I guess, maybe like explaining why you're asking the question you may be asking, so that you can better understand the situation, and maybe it will lead to some really great ideas.

Marty:

Perfect, perfect, perfect. To that point, these are three questions that we ask all of our guests to sort of wrap us up. We've done a deep dive in an area, we want to come back out from that deep dive, we want to leave it on a slightly different note. I'm going to start, both of you have had these questions, Nimit, you've answered these questions multiple times. Feel free to use the same answer. And Erin, these are the first time that you're answering these questions, but feel free to take it in any direction that you want. We're not afraid of tangents here. My first question, and Erin, we'll start with you, is which living person do you most admire?

Erin:

I looked at these, and I'm a big proponent of just like whatever is the first thing that comes to my mind is the answer I'm going to give. And actually, I had two people come to mind, and neither of them are living. One is my grandma, who was just one of the most amazing people to ever walk the face of this earth. And the other is Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Marty:

She's a drop the mic answer, right there. That's great. Is that one of the reasons why you've chosen to go to law school? Is there an inspiration there?

00:50:44

Erin:

I actually didn't know as much about Ruth Bader Ginsburg until, I don't know, maybe like the last couple of years, but she was a professor at Rutgers law school, which I just think is amazing. What a small world. That could be a much longer answer. Short answer, no. However, now that I know more about her story, I'm very intrigued. No, the decision to go to law school was something like from years and years and years ago, that interestingly the pandemic, all of a sudden, I'm like, "I have all this time. I guess I'll study for the LSAT." And then, "I guess I'll apply." And now here I am.

Marty:

Nimit, same question to you. Which living person do you most admire?

Nimit:

The living person I always answer as Michelle Obama. But for a change for this podcast, a person who is not living, who actually has a holiday coming up, I would say Martin Luther King [crosstalk 00:51:42].

Marty:

Not bad. It was a good answer. Good for you. Wonderful. My second question to both of you is, who are your favorite heroes or heroines from fiction? And Nimit, let's start with you this time.

Nimit:

I used to be obsessed with Harry Potter when I was younger.

Marty:

Still am. No problem there.

Nimit:

Not as much, but still have that childish heart.

Marty:

That's a great answer. I fully endorse that. How about you, Erin?

Erin:

Again, what came to my mind really quickly was the mom from The Incredibles. I love her.

Marty:

I think, as you reminded me, you're not too far from the first time we met, the way you've handled so many things in your life.

Erin:

Oh, my gosh, it was such a great first meeting.

Marty:

That's great. Harper, why don't I bring you in to ask our final question to both of our guests?

Harper:

Our final question is, if you could put a message on a billboard in Time Square, where everybody would see it for 24 hours, what would that billboard say, and why? Erin, we'll start with you.

Erin:

This is a sneaky one. This isn't on the paper.

Harper:

First thing that comes to your mind.

Erin:

I know. I'm kind of stuck with, "Don't make assumptions." Like maybe that, I think it's very relevant.

Harper:

I would agree. That is very relevant. And it's very important.

Nimit:

Also, a question I did think about myself before, I guess, like they say, "Don't judge a book by its cover.", I would say, "Don't judge a person by simply their appearance." Outside appearance, I should say.

Marty:

I love it. They're both [crosstalk 00:53:18].

Nimit:

This is very random, just made up right now.

Nimit:

Those are the best kind. With that, unless there – we did have other questions on there. Was there another question that either of you wanted to answer, that you're burning to answer that particular question?

Erin:

It's not actually a question. But I do just want to share some praise about Nimit. And how we started at Rutgers together four years ago, Nimit. And just what a special connection I feel to her, and also to like some of the first people I met when I got here, and then they have since graduated, or whatnot. But like how amazing that Nimit can now work with the office. And she's basically a local celebrity, her, and Chardonnay . And just how fortunate we are that she chose to come to Rutgers. She is amazing. And it's just really, really great to work with her in all of these different capacities that we've been able to.

00:54:10

Nimit:

Thank you. It was a pleasure being able to connect with all of you guys. Thanks, Erin, for really connecting me. I think that was in the middle of our conversation when I kept asking you, "How can I work with you?" And then I think I came to one of my meetings with you for something. And then you told me how you met Marty through your – was it a soccer game, I think? If I remember correctly. And then you told me about like that work. Then I was like, "Oh, yes. Totally." Thank you so much for understanding my passion in such a short time and being willing to give me that connection and build my social network.

Erin:

Absolutely.

Marty:

Hear, hear.

Erin:

I feel like all of these relationships have been so serendipitous. Marty, you and I crossed paths at the local Giant, and you said, "Hey, I want to talk to you, we're looking to really diversify our workforce. And I thought about you and your role at Rutgers working with people with disabilities." And then shortly after that, I had a meeting with Nimit. And I was like, "I've got to connect her with Marty." I just feel like all of this, it's like the universe working the way it's supposed to. It's very cool.

Marty:

Without a doubt, it's relationship based. Everything that happens is relationship based. And I love it. Erin, I know that you are super busy, you have a lot going on, a lot of people to support, lead, and listen to, and guide. And so, we're so appreciative of you coming on and spending some time with us, we're going to have to bring you back, there's more to talk about. Just get

ready for that. And Nimit, as always, thank you for everything that you do with Tamman every day. I really want to keep this conversation going.

I feel so fortunate to work with the likes of Nimit Kaur. She makes Tamman better every single day. And to have someone like Erin Leuthold, in the profession that she's in, but also be a neighbor for me and keep the conversation going. It's really, really powerful. Thank you both for coming on. There's a lot that we have to learn in industry from what is happening in higher education right now. And specifically, if you're listening, and you're someone who hires people with disabilities, or has the ability to hire people with disabilities, knowing what path they've taken through Higher Ed, and what works in terms of support, so that we can hire and retain people, is really, really important. And I hope folks got a lot out of that. If you like what you heard on Article 19 today, please leave us a five-star rating. Leave us a review, tell a friend or a colleague, all of that really helps the podcast grow. And we appreciate it. If you disagreed with something that you heard today, please don't leave anything. Actually, just kidding. We do want to hear from you, and you can find us across all of our social media @tammaninc, or through our website tammaninc.com. That's T-A-M-M-A-N-I-N-C .com. And while you're there, don't forget to sign up for our newsletter so you never miss a beat with us. Thank you so much for listening, and we will keep the conversation going next time.

00:57:11