Invisible Disabilities Don't Stop Women in STEM | CPD

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In celebration of International Women’s Day today, and Women’s History Month during March, three women students at Utah State University who have hidden disabilities and are majoring in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and math) participated in a panel discussion Wednesday afternoon. The discussion was presented by the Center for Persons with Disabilities (CPD) and the Disability Resource Center (DRC), and was moderated by CPD researcher Vonda Jump. Bryce Fifield, CPD director, introduced the panel and noted the difference between the two campus entities. The DRC, he said, facilitates accessibility for students with disabilities. The CPD, however, conducts research, training and planning to serve the entire disability community locally, nationally and worldwide.

Melissa Harvey, from Providence, is a senior majoring in biology with a minor in chemistry. She is interested in human physiology and says she is somewhat following a pre-med path, but doesn’t want to be a doctor. She has a slow processing speed and low math fluency. Kaisa Forsyth is a sophomore environmental engineering major from Conifer, Colo. and has problems processing things quickly. She chose a STEM field because water quality is very important to her. She wants to work with sustainable design in less developed countries. Kimmi Krause, studying for a second bachelor’s degree in wildlife science, is from Trabuco Canyon, Calif. She has been working with wolves and wolf-dogs and hopes to eventually earn a Ph.D. and work with the wolf population in Yellowstone National Park. She has ADHD and says “math is a different language. The professor says one thing and my brain goes somewhere else.” Harvey was diagnosed with a learning disability last year, and was referred to the DRC by a calculus professor who had noted how she struggled with the material. She attended every available office-hour help session yet had a hard time conquering the concepts. She would do well on the first part of a test, and then start guessing as time ran out. She now meets with a behavioral specialist through the DRC to help her better manage her time and minimize testing anxiety. She is also able to take tests in a quiet environment, in a longer period of time. A tablet computer received for a recent birthday has helped Harvey with note-taking. She can color-code and make notes on PDFs provided by professors. “I’m way more organized than I’ve ever been before,” she said, but there are other advantages as well. “I spend less money on notebooks, my house is cleaner and it’s really easy to index my notes,” she said. Harvey is married, working part-time and attending school full-time. She finds that traditional students in study groups, for whatever reason, don’t seem as serious about their studies. “I get more done with less frustration if I do it myself,” she said. Harvey said the culture in Utah may be part of what dissuades more women from studying STEM fields, which often require more advanced degrees. She wants children someday, and she doesn’t necessarily want to continue her schooling after completing her bachelor’s degree.

Forsythe attends study groups, but reviews the material before the group meets. She also spends 15 minutes before each class, reviewing notes, and expects that it will take her twice as long to complete the assigned homework. But it’s OK, she said with a laugh, because “being an engineer, you really don’t have much of a social life anyway.” Forsythe is also able to take tests in a quiet environment, and is allowed more time. Before receiving accommodations, she said, she felt like there was something wrong with her because she couldn’t do the work as fast as her peers. “I’m not less intelligent,” she said. “I’m just not as fast.” Forsyth agreed that the culture plays a part in why many women in Utah don’t graduate from college, but also said it’s because many of them don’t know what they want from life. “But I want this,” she said. “Women in engineering courses can have a family and be an engineer, but there are a lot of opportunities to travel. As a woman, I could stay home, but I could also see the world.” Krause takes extensive notes during class and looks online for additional supporting information. She sometimes attends study groups and finds them helpful, but also is more distracted with more people around, so “it’s a double-edged sword,” she said. Krause, like Harvey, appreciates the use of technology, because she can re-listen to lectures and watch the slides again on Canvas. However, she uses a more old-school approach to organization. She has a huge corkboard, segmented by days and hours, and uses sticky notes to keep track of assignments and commitments. Pride kept her from going to the DRC at first, she said, because she didn’t want to admit that she needed help. “Don’t be afraid to
ask questions,” Krause said. “Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Find ways to enable you to ultimately succeed.” And, it’s not like students who receive accommodations are getting a huge advantage over other students, she said. “Being able to take a test in a very quiet area and not be distracted is huge,” she said. While it may take her longer to complete homework assignments, Krause is not worried about how that could affect her future career. All three women agreed that doing hands-on work, and applying what has been learned, is much easier than the actual learning. Krause also looks for ways she can use her ADHD to her advantage. “How can I use this chaotic, out-of-the-box thinking?” she said. “How can this be different? I don’t let it intimidate me.” The panel participants also agreed that people should reach for their goals, no matter how difficult. “Go forth and conquer,” Krause said. “If you have an ambition, don’t be afraid to do it. Go for it--don’t let anything stop you. If you really want to do it, just do it.”

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